Varieties of Mythic Experience

Essays on Religion, Psyche and Culture

Edited by Dennis Patrick Slattery and Glen Slater

DAIMON

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Foreword

Robert Sardello

The chapters of this exciting volume are extremely varied. This exuberance of expression already gives us a clue to the nature of myth. It likes to propagate. It likes to exist in the richness of complexity. It is not interested in one version being the top dog. It is play-in-action. It is alive; even as it is talked about, you can still feel the teeming life bursting through.

The editors of this volume are quick to point out that while science is still loathe to see the myth in its own constructs, it cannot keep myth down. Myth is far too mercurial to be arrested by simplistic rationality. But, to get a real feeling for myth, one must find the way into mythic feeling, into mythic awareness. As long as our thinking is dualistic – awareness of myth, rather than field-phenomenological – mythic-awareness, we are through such limited thinking working against myth while trying to speak for it. Thus, the orienting question I want to pose as a possible way of reading this impressive collection of essays is: “What is mythic awareness like?”

It is somewhat limiting, I think, to argue that while myth belongs to times past, the psyche still needs myth for its own being. I also think it is limiting to tie myth only to the imagination, literature, metaphor, depth psychology, and the humanities. All those connections are certainly true, but today in a period of cultural chaos and breakdown, there exist perhaps more urgent and pressing reasons for the necessity of what myth provides: we need a sense of myth for our individual and collective equilibrium. Sanity itself may be tied to having some kind of lively imagination so that one can feel the strange fantasies that continue to insist themselves into consciousness in both waking and dreaming states, as well as similarities within the images and the language of myth.

Far more importantly, moreover, we lose the sense of our own embodiment in the absence of mythic awareness and in the prevalence of abstraction. Such a condition outlines the contours of our collective insanity. Myth, however, heals because myth embodies. I want to emphasize such an effect of reading these papers more than I am interested in arguing for the importance of the fields that make use of myth, because once we have lost the sense of body and imagination in any form, when it is given any credence at all, it is simultaneously taken into a rarified realm of abstraction.

It is easy to travel within unending circles of abstraction, trading one form and one level of abstraction for another, by suggesting that myth is at the heart of being embodied human beings. Body, as currently imagined, is itself already a very abstract notion, usurped by biology and physiology and medicine, fields that now tell us what our body consists of. Yet such a vision of the body is based exclusively on quantification. This is not the body I mean.

Rather, I am addressing the felt sense of *bodying*, body as activity open to the world, not that confined shape I see in the mirror. Bodying as *ex-isting.* Myth brings us back to that felt sense of bodying because myth, not philosophy or metaphysics, is the living language of ex-isting. Myth, therefore, is not a content at all; rather, it is an open field of the bodying forth of the world. The editors of this volume point out such an attitude of bodying forth in their introduction when they wisely introduce the difference between the ineffable realm of myth, and mythology. Mythology can be heard as the stories of how myth bodies in infinitely multiple ways, giving the gods an earthly home, the home of our being.

Myth-ing as bodying forth the world brings us directly to the chapters of this volume. If readers grasp the sense of what I am addressing about myth, then they will also be quite astounded with these writings because taken collectively, this collection expresses with deep conviction and insight how the bodying of myth forms into stories that differentiate, but do not ever separate out, from the dynamic unity of the whole. While the mythological stories are therefore as diverse as the chapters of this book, readers will find themselves equally drawn to them all because the draw, the strange

attractor, is that unspeakable dynamic activity of the whole that it is impossible to be satiated by – in large measure because it is so life-giving and life-affirming.

Reading this grouping of diverse papers, written by highly articulate people, people of the word, is accompanied by the interesting challenge of attempting to refrain from reading about one or another myth and taking it as merely interesting information or an engaging story. Rather, the task would be to enter into the felt sense of the myth that backs the mythology that supports the critical reflection provided by each author. To do so does not ask the reader to do anything more, or at least not much more, than was accomplished at some level by each of the authors. Suggesting approaching the following collection in this manner is, I know, unusual. However, doing so is therapeutic, not only in a personal, but in a world way. If myth can be awakened in the felt sense of bodying, then it also releases into the wider world, for, finally, the body is an open system and thus porous to mythic awareness.

It is fascinating, for example, to read Christine Downing's highly-developed and thorough chapter, and in the process allow oneself to feel that most basic and foundational aspect of Biblical Myth as the wholeness of the One, i.e., how we are within the One and the One is within us. It does not matter one wit if one is Christian or not. We all participate in this mythic awareness. And, it is extremely freeing and relieving to feel that place of the One. For at the same time, it is a place that is no place; it is always here but cannot be pointed to, and it offers readers a sense of being some-One. This awareness is sensed, felt bodily and lived in immediacy; one tends to forget it only when the world becomes disembodied and slips back into the posture of abstraction. At just such a moment, then, we need Christine Downing to remind us of this myth that is, always.

When, moreover, Laura Grillo begins her essay by suggesting that "… myth is a symptom of the wrestling that human beings do in light of what is both our most prized and poignant condition: self-awareness," she steps directly into the center of mythic awareness. The wording tells the whole story – *self-awareness*. She does not say "awareness of oneself," or "knowing who you are," but chooses instead this particular expression,

which I understand as: knowing the god-being one is. Through extrapolation, it is easy to understand that myth, the picturing of the actions of the gods, can open to participation only through the god-action we are. That is to say, each individual is an embodied god, is as well the bodying forth of the gods. (admittedly, embodying the gods seems to limit their powers, alas. That limitation, however, is due to a shared disbelief in our mythic nature.)

It should be no surprise, then, that this chapter focuses on the embodied imagination, for what is stated here brings to the foreground an insight that myth is always sensuous, intangibly tangible, and, it is always, in one form or another enacted. Thus, myth cannot be separated from ritual; the entanglement of the two is a basic expression of myth as bodying.

Another aspect of Grillo's chapter that reveals a further facet about the nature of myth concerns her illustration that in the Toraja rituals for the dead, this world and the world across the threshold share a likeness, are indeed similars. Here, then, is a wonderful expression of that unity of myth, where multiple worlds also testify to one world. Even more, when one grasps the felt-sense of this unity, and then includes one's self within that unity rather than hold to the attitude of an outside observer, s/he arrives at a powerful insight concerning myth and mythology: Mythology is the fiction that puts outside of us, in the forms of image and metaphor, a picture of what we are living all the time – our own being. Mythology is thus the fiction that there is another world, or other, multiple worlds. Myth may be understood as the unified, polyvalent bodying forth of the whole of the world. Such is myth's encompassing power and presence.

My intention is to suggest an approach to reading this stimulating collection of musings on myth in such a way that the action works into and changes readers by making them aware of being a being of world-unity, while in the same instant not losing a sense of their individuality. Then, myth and mythology become therapeutic rather than additional information for the intellect. Myths' sweep is much grander than mind alone can encompass.

The insightful and novel aspects of this book is that such a wide and diverse range of mythologies are worked with in great detail Such a

collection makes it possible to feel the wonder of being a body in the way that I am describing: bodying as a field of felt presence of the coming-into-being of the whole of the world in its exciting particularities, a process that occurs unceasingly each moment.

A minor but important suggestion: as the reader peruses each chapter, notice the bodily sensations that occur; notice the one or two things that particularly astound and arrest your reading, where you are compelled to linger for a moment. With this felt sense, try to enter into an imagination, an active fantasy, of the mythic feeling that is expressed in the reflection on the particular mythology being read about. Then allow that feeling to be fully present; carry it and let it return through the day. That is, let the myth embody. Treat this book as a manual for the development of mythic-awareness as well as for the information and accompanying insights each essay develops.

The reader will find, for example, that she suddenly feels the full sense of what Yoga contains, for example, in Patrick Mahaffey's chapter. It may be that the reader will not have words for it, not right away, but as this one instance of how all of the chapters are written, namely, with so much of a real felt sense of the myth, it is possible to enter into any of the mythic realms described throughout the collection with this same approach. With one or more of the mythologies discussed, readers, I am convinced, will be inspired then to go to the mythologies themselves. For example, in one sentence Mahaffey opens up the movement from pre-Vedic lunar mythology, to the Vedas, to the Upanishads as one whole, vital motion. At the same time, a central aspect of our being also opens – the oneness of being as being-alone, of being all-one, all one in multiplicity.

I admit to feeling liberated to speak in this way about myth, even to address directly scholars who might question this approach. I am led to such an understanding by a small comment in V. Walter Odajnyk's chapter: "My academic and scholarly approach to the mandala is pursued primarily with that experiential goal in mind. Precisely such a blend of scholarly and experiential approaches characterizes Mythological Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute." If thinking about myth is therefore not accompanied by some authentic mythic-embodiment, then this volume and readers too may

be contributing to the cultural problem of the loss of feeling.

Another very powerful sentence in the same chapter states: “The Tibetan tangkas speak to Tibetans in the same manner as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* spoke to the ancient Greeks, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to the ancient Indians, and *the Divine Comedy* to Renaissance Christians.” Odajnyk offers an amazing sentence that immediately brings the body into resonance with the Tibetan myth. Once that resonance is felt, a strong impulse to ingest and to contemplate what the author describes follows. Readers may find themselves fully engaged, when perhaps a first impression and impulse might be: “well, maybe I’ll skip this chapter because Tibetan myth does not interest me.” Such a response would cheat readers of both an experience of myth as well as insights into comparative mythology.

Furthermore, a central essay of this book is Dennis Patrick Slattery’s “*Oedipus at Colonus*: Pilgrimage from Blight to Blessedness.” I suggest it is central because Oedipus is an embodied image of a mythic moment in the evolution of culture, that mythic moment in which a dawning awareness concludes: to be human is to be a mythic being. That is to say, without this felt sense of the bodying forth of the world as myth, we are not human beings at all, but doubles of human beings. Slattery definitely conveys this felt-sense of human-as-mythic with the realization that *excess* itself is the signature of myth. Taken in and felt bodily, this sense of excess means that we are so teeming with creative power that perhaps the main question of life is how to fit something so large into the equally valid dimension of the smallness of being human. Slattery gives us the way of living this paradox – woundedness/blesseness, which is both a condition as well as an attitude that Oedipus finally arrives at and is the essential task of the mythic human.

Glen Slater’s essay continues and amplifies the felt presence of the ongoing presence of myth, the now of it. He assumes the almost unwieldy task of arguing that there is no escape from myth. He further develops the idea that one of the modern senses of myth is our mythology of extraterrestrials, which further verifies and testifies that excess is the mark of myth. More than that, I grew to appreciate his introducing mythic monsters, particularly in relation to outer space. This juxtaposition informs us that myth also always concerns the unknown. It is not as if myth is

finished and exists in some archetypal landscape waiting to be discovered.

One senses when he enters mythic awareness because it is the moment of no-longer-knowing. That is to say, myth is necessarily alien and cannot be tamed. It is necessarily and perhaps intrinsically, monstrous. It is thus beyond our imagination, but since it is sensuous, it will appear as alien beings that are all-body, which for a culture that has excluded body, presents itself as all-consuming. The essay is profound in its insights as well because it furthers the sense that I have been developing throughout: myth as bodying-forth of world has nothing to do with our current sentimentalized imagination of *body as natural.* Slater's essay also invites us to look at 'alien abductees' as those figures who have been taken over to the side of myth. That is, the image of the 'alien' is the central mything aspect of our being.

I admit at this juncture that I have always disliked the spate of books that either have the title or carry the sense of "the gods in me." Ginette Paris redeems this oversimplified popular cliché to attract readers interested in myth by directing them exactly to where I am in this Foreword: Mythic thinking is always "Who, What, and "How" thinking rather than explanatory "Why" thinking. But, as is so well conveyed by Paris, we have to be vigilant not to convert Who into a version of Why. If we approach myth mentally, then such confusion is inevitable. The "Who" question is one that concerns the realm of feeling – feeling not as "what did that make me feel," or "my feeling." Rather, I am addressing feeling as a mode of knowing, a way of knowing something that cannot be achieved or gained any other way. Such a truth is so self-evident that it can be missed. There is no fiction without feeling; myth is the supreme god of fiction.

David Miller addresses directly perhaps the largest problem of all. The reader sits with the book, reading about myth. In this process the wordless, the speechless, the non-verbal is transformed into words. Mythos becomes Logos. Immediately at the outset, Miller declares such an accepted division false. Instead, he relocates the problem into the correct sphere. Thinking is itself myth. How could it not be? Only if one excludes the realm of thinking from the bodying forth of the world. The two, however – mythos and logos – will always seem to be in opposition until the moment that the word too is

felt. What Miller develops in this chapter is the notion of there being a semiotics of felt sense. He is not explicit about this, but it is present implicitly throughout the essay.

This meeting place of mythos and logos in the *felt* dissolves in one instant any seeming contradiction between image and word. There is no image without the felt sense and there is no living work without the felt sense. Mythology – mytho-logos, is the arena which invites both to speak in unison.

As I reflect on the collection of attitudes and approaches to the study of myth contained in this volume, a joint effort by the faculty of Mythological Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute, something becomes very clear: there exists an amazing collection of lively people who are asking a fundamental question: what is it to be a mythic human being? This book is one aspect, one version, of how this group of scholars work within this question. That they, with this publication, wish to enlarge the community holding such a question is a major contribution to scholarship and a significant step forward in the study of myth. Academics, their students and lay people interested in the mythic substratum of being will benefit immeasurably by reading and imagining the possibilities contained herein.

Robert Sardello
Benson, North Carolina

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Introduction

Glen Slater and Dennis Patrick Slattery

Approaching myth requires an embrace of paradox. From one perspective mythic themes may be located at almost every level of human endeavor: poets and artists repeatedly dip into the well of myth for the metaphors and images that shape their works; psychologists and social critics tie spirit and soul to mythic characters and movements; scientists render alternative cosmologies by turning new eyes to old mythologies. For those who seek such quarry, myth's shapes may be found in every drama, life passage, heroic act, ritual, passionate undertaking and all manner of love's multiple gestures. We turn to myth to convey the depth and breadth of life. Myth is a baseline, a ground, and place of eternal return.

From another perspective, however, myths may be regarded as hangovers of ancient, pre-scientific worlds, irrational attempts to describe the workings of the cosmos, giving them for some an air of falsity. Viewed in this manner, myth is opposed to what is real and is thereby regarded as without substance. For those involved in the serious study of myth, however, such a blanket dismissal is untenable as well as naïve. Yet this unreal, untrue view of myth harbors some validity: The contents of myths are supernatural and fantastic, even as the origins of a given myth are never fully traceable, versions are varied and incomplete, and meanings are multiple and seemingly unending. Hold a myth too tightly and it slips through one's fingers with the consistency of mercury. In light of such attributes, myth is fragmentary, skittish, and otherworldy. Its essential Protean nature defies manhandling or neat packaging. No wonder then, as Kevin Shilbrack observes for example, "contemporary philosophy shows little interest in the study of myths." If indeed, he goes on to suggest, that "Myths disclose alternative worlds…a belief in these mythic worlds [has

been seen] as an aspect of culture that was soon superseded" (*Thinking Through Myths* 1). Myths become fussy when not accepted on their own terms.

The essential paradox is this: Myth points to a baseline that can never be fully drawn; there exists no lowest layer for myth. As Sallustius suggested in the fourth century, and mythologists have paraphrased ever since, myth *always* is, but never was. Myths show universality, yet they only appear in culturally specific ways. Myths draw us into the past, yet their significance comes from new and renewed contact with the present. Myths are simultaneously substantial and insubstantial, like quarks in physics.

To accommodate the paradoxical qualities of myth, its approach requires a different way of knowing, another angle or inflection to the ordinary sense of knowledge. Beyond the need for an interdisciplinary foundation, studies in mythology force us from the narrower confines of everyday consciousness into the poetic, metaphoric and more affective realms of the imaginal. Only in the imagination does myth find its fitting medium, for only the imagination can negotiate the fusions, feats and enchantments of myth and dream into the significance of these states. At the same time, however, myth saves the imagination from being directionless and arbitrary. The structures and forms of *mythopoesis* create resonances that cross cultural and temporal divides to carry the imagination beyond the merely whimsical. Just as myth requires the language of imagination, the imagination finds its weight and bearing in myth. Entering the paradox of myth calls forth the *mundus imaginalis*. In this imaginal realm, myth has a spaciousness to cook in its own juices. It need not be fixed to places, peoples or times, nor reduced to any theoretical structure in order to instill wisdom or incite thought.

The paradoxical and necessarily imaginal ground of myth has consequences for a more formal study of mythology in the academy. Mythology is the faithful companion of almost every discipline in the humanities, yet its dedicated or concentrated study is a rare pursuit. Although works on mythic traditions are many, academic programs in mythology are few. The study of myth has tended to be subsumed under the study of comparative religion or folklore, or engaged as an offshoot of art,

literature, history or cinema. Myth therefore served as handmaiden, a byproduct of sorts to “authentic” disciplines of study. Nevertheless, this contrast between the omnipresence of myth in cultural expression and the largely absent formal means to approach its study fuels a fire in those who have come to sense the essential role of myth in human discourse. Such a sensibility leads not only to a careful consideration of traditional mythologies, but also to an application of mythological perspectives to contemporary social phenomena. Far from being an anachronistic preoccupation with an antiquated worldview, current mythological studies are passionately dedicated to the philosophical, psychological and sociological topics that define the present era.

Fully reflecting the above considerations, this volume gathers writings by one group dedicated to the study of myth and the interpretation of mythic forms in traditional and contemporary culture. All contributors are present or past members of the Mythological Studies faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute. While the essays range widely and show a panoply of approaches to mythology, all convey an awareness of myth as a taproot, both anchoring and sustaining religion, psychology, literature and culture. All of these contributions reveal myth as a cultural constant, a means to align oneself with the cosmos, woven into the ways we approach reality and the acts of imagining that forge theoretical ideas and artistic visions. Bearing witness to this presence of mythos in thought and action, pointing out the weave of this elemental means of apprehension and comprehension, largely comprises the spirit of the chapters that follow.

One particularity of these authors and their work is a sustained engagement with the perspectives and concepts of depth psychology. Portraying the manner in which the modern study of mythology has dovetailed with theories of the unconscious, particularly C.G. Jung’s notions of the collective unconscious and its archetypal patterns imbedded therein, these essays are also peppered with psychological insights, be they at a cultural or individual level. This confluence of mythological and psychological perspectives may itself be traced back to the imagination, which is also regarded as the psyche’s primary mode of expression, an understanding that finds initial expression in Freud’s work, becomes

pivotal for Jung, and has been further and more fully elaborated on by James Hillman.

Moreover, the comparative studies of mythology by Joseph Campbell and his reading of myth alongside philosophies of life owe much to the psychology of archetypal forms. In a sense, mythologies present their own psychologies, drives, and complexes to help us insight myth just as heroes and tricksters help us insight psyche. Thus, just as myth and imagination are codetermined, myth seems equally tethered to the deeper reaches of the psyche – an understanding well-delineated in the following pages.

The essays that comprise this volume first appear to be extremely diverse, not unlike myths themselves. However, the contributions are united through a skein of threads that also intertwine several essays. Many of their themes address mythology in the context of religious texts and practices, while others extract and comment upon mythic themes found in literature and film. Still others explore cultural phenomena through myth or by means of philosophical concerns in the study of mythology and Depth Psychology. Each essay, therefore, begins with a short "Preface" in which the author advances his or her stand on myth, one's own angle on the study of myth and mythopoiesis, followed by an exploration of a mythic theme that that reflects that stance.

The Essays

The most prevalent theme of the volume is the consideration of *myth in religious tradition*: Christine Downing's essay, "The Myth of Biblical Monotheism," addresses Biblical monotheism by regarding the Hebrew tradition from a mythic perspective; Laura Grillo's "Rambu Solo: The Toraja Cult of the Dad and Embodied Imagination" studies the indigenous religion of the Toraja of Indonesia and so demonstrates the role of myth in embodied ritual; Patrick Mahaffey offers an overview of Hindu yoga in "The Heart of Hindu Mythos: Yogic Perspectives in Self-Realization" by revealing how the competing aims of embracing the world and withdrawing from it coalesce in this tradition. Walter Odajnyk enters the world of Tibetan Buddhism in "Mandala of the Naropa Dakini: Archetypal and

Psychological Commentary" to provide a Jungian interpretation of a traditional mandala. Each of these writings shed light on the complex and complementary dance of religion and myth.

Commenting on *mythic themes in literature and film* is a popular mainstay of applied mythological studies, whether such themes are explicit or implicit in the works considered. In either case, the perdurance of mythic forms and their endless guises guides the work at hand. Dennis Patrick Slattery's essay on Sophocles' "*Oedipus at Colonus*: Pilgrimage from Blight to Blessedness" takes an overtly mythic drama and deepens our appreciation of its movements and dilemmas by turning the tragedy over with fresh insight. Glen Slater steps into the broad genre of mythic monsters in "Aliens and Insects" and applies this to the contemporary fascination with alien space invaders, exemplified most particularly in the cinematic arts. To the extent scripture may be regarded as literature, Downing and Mahaffey's essays also show facets of a mythological hermeneutic at work.

Ginette Paris engages psychology with a mythological sensibility in "How is Psychology a Mythology?" to persuasively suggest how *life experiences, theories and cultural phenomena may be comprehended by seeing through to their mythic and archetypal undercurrents*. Paris observes that "events never become hermetically sealed," but can be reimagined, reinterpreted and resituated in differing mythic currents. The spirit of iconoclasm found in her essay surfaces once more in David Miller's treatment in "Legende-Image: The Word/Image Problem" of the often uneasy alliance between word and image by entertaining *philosophical concerns* as they pertain to mythological studies. Informed by a half-century in the academy as well as a vigilant gaze over theoretical debates in depth psychology, Miller's chapter demonstrates the wariness of certitude essential in approaching mythology. Elements of the essays by Downing and Grillo also question theoretical assumptions as they engage their respective topics.

Each chapter in this volume, therefore, demonstrates how a sense of myth is given new life by holding lightly the theories and concepts we bring to mythological studies, and by keeping the text, phenomenon or tradition

under consideration immediate and ultimately irreducible. Perhaps this attitude of topical reverence, as well as much that is expressed above, is contained within the difference between the terms “myth” and “mythology.” As the irreducible and irrefutable mode of imagining that generates the motifs and figures of traditional narratives, *myth* always remains largely beyond intellectual reach. *Mythology*, the logos of myth, pertains to the narratives themselves immediately alongside the understandings and interpretations they generate, be they traditional stories, literary works or even present-day renditions of old tales. Myth faces down into the unfathomable reaches of cosmos and soul; mythology also reaches up into culture and mind through expression in language, art, or other forms of embodying the myth. Thus *one looks through mythology towards myth*, as looking “through a glass darkly” in striving to perceive and articulate essences that must remain, finally but hardly futilely, inaccessible. Not a need for certitude or an absolute response but rather “a willing suspension of disbelief,” so that one can indeed believe, is the more efficacious companion on the royal road of mythos.

For these reasons, mythological studies aim beyond the mere familiarization with mythic narrative towards an appreciation of *mythos* as an inextricable dimension of human consciousness and out into contemporary culture in search of myths surfacing in everyday life. The ultimate aim of mythological studies is not simply to recite traditional narratives but to perceive with a capacious mythic eye in order to engage the phenomenal world with a mythological sensibility, one attuned outward to the universal and storied qualities of our surroundings, as well as inward to the essential narrative nature of our being. In such a receptive attitude, we learn to participate in the longing, evident in soul and creation alike, to rest in the cradle of mythic imagining. We hope that this gathering of essays aids the readers of this volume to gain greater access to mythology’s multiple layers of wonder and mystery.

Religion

1. The Myth of Biblical Monotheism

Christine Downing

Wendy Doniger has said that it is impossible to define myth, but cowardly not to try. In my own teaching I seem to be as dedicated to making my students less sure they know what myth is than to confirm their pre-established views or to persuade them of mine – and in the process I have become more and more aware of how much my own is still in process and will, I believe, be likely to remain so.

What I have loved about teaching in a mythological studies program is how it has forced me to look with new eyes at material I had imagined myself to be deeply familiar with – be that the Hebrew Bible or Greek literature, Nietzsche or Freud, romanticism or feminism – how it has encourage me to discover how a mythological perspective might differ from a religious studies perspective or a depth psychological or philosophical one.

From the beginning what has seemed clear to me is that myths are stories. Like Nietzsche, I see them as stories we tell to help us confront and at the same time elude – and illude – meaninglessness, suffering, ineluctable conflict, and death. I am also deeply aware that such stories – especially when we forget they are stories and take them literally, that is, come to believe them – can be used to do terrible damage to the soul and to our relationships with one another and to the world around us.

*

When I agreed to teach a course on the monotheisms in the mythological studies program at Pacifica, I felt at least relatively qualified: I had written my doctoral dissertation on Martin Buber with an especial focus on his translation of the Hebrew Bible into German and his biblical commentaries and during my first ten years of teaching back east I regularly taught

courses on both Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament – though I never did so during the nearly twenty years I taught at San Diego State University. In retrospect the hiatus has come to seem a blessing, for it helped me return to once familiar materials in a fresh way, ready to try to discover what looking at them from a mythological studies perspective would require – and reveal.

I knew that for probably most of our students there would be enough emotional engagement with this myth system that it might be difficult to approach it in the same ways they had learned to adopt when studying the myths of ancient Egypt or Greece, Hindu or Buddhist mythology, or the mythic traditions of the First People of our hemisphere or of contemporary Africa.

The challenge as I understood it would be to look at monotheism itself as a myth (not just as one including little bits and pieces of myth here and there) – and to approach this myth not with belief or disbelief but imaginally. This would mean not (to begin with anyway) focusing on *critiques* of this myth – from polytheistic or feminist or depth psychological perspectives – but rather trying to enter into the myth, into how the world looks from its perspective. Not, of course, that we can wholly succeed in doing this, any more than we can really respond to Greek tragedy as its 5th c Athenian audience did. Our engagement can only be dialogical, that empathic engagement with another's world that Dilthey saw as characteristic of all *Geisteswissenschaften.*

So I knew I would have to begin by trying to clarify – both to myself and to my students – my own relation to this material. Would I be approaching it as an "insider" or an "outsider"? As usual with such either/or's, I found myself confounded. I'm a pagan, a polytheist – but not exactly: I don't really "believe in" or worship the Greek gods and goddesses to whom I owe so much; rather I find them (to borrow a phrase from Levi-Strauss) "good to think with" or (to borrow this time from James Hillman) to "see through." Yet the biblical stories, particularly the Genesis stories, live in me almost as natively as do the Greek myths.

As I put it in an essay I wrote a few years ago, when I reread how in his *Good And Evil* Buber explores what the biblical myths might have to say to

us “latecomers of the spirit” who have outgrown these myths but are still accessible to them, I became aware of how important these stories are to my self-understanding, how although for me the biblical mythos is a broken one with no automatic authority, it is nonetheless still illuminating and challenging. Indeed, in a strange way, this mythos seems more powerful after having been rejected as *the* mythos. It’s as if the biblical god, YHVH, has become a necessary figure in my pantheon, part of a polytheistic system that needs this upstart young god who claims to be the only one, this god who keeps calling us to be response-able, to turn away from evil, to choose the good. There’s a tradition in Greek mythology that Dionysos was a late-appearing god who so clearly represented a form of divine energy with which none of the other gods were associated that the Greeks had to recognize he was, indeed, a god and so had to make room for him in their pantheon as one of the Twelve Olympians. I’m trying to say something similar, that YHVH clearly is a god, different from any of the others, and has to be recognized, honored, included, not as *the god*, but nonetheless as god (Downing, “It’s Not So Simple” 51).

Myth Become Text

Long, long ago I was an undergraduate literature major and my approach to myth still bears traces of that: I am drawn to myth become text, become literature. Thus I knew my focus in approaching the myth of monotheism would be directed to the Hebrew Bible, the foundational text for all three of the living monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I hoped that I and my students might be able to read the Bible as though we had never encountered it before, might come to appreciate the foreignness of this long-ago world. Doing so, I was convinced, would come from recognizing how much of this worldview is expressed through the formal qualities, the artistry, of its most important literature. The so-called “historical books” of the Hebrew Bible (*Genesis* through *II Kings*) may well be the first great prose narrative of Western literature.[1] The choice of prose is significant; it probably represents a deliberate rejection of the poetic epic form associated with the cultic recitations of Babylonian polytheism.[2] Reading the biblical

texts well means reading them attentive to their formal structures, their language and imagery, their delight in word play and folk etymology,[3] their pungent concreteness;[4] it means noticing the gaps and contradictions[5] and the repetitions and variations.[6] It is in large measure through these formal aspects that the meaning is communicated.

Such a literary approach implies a respect for the edited text, the text as given its almost final shape by the Priestly writers of the late exilic period (3rd and 2nd centuries bce). Scholars often refer to this group of editors as "R" for Redactor, but Buber liked to imagine that the R stood for *Rabbenau*, our teacher, so respectful was he of the genius evident in this weaving together of material representing a diversity of perspectives drawn from many different periods, an interlacing that creates a whole that honors the parts out of which it is composed.[7] The editors made no sustained attempt to smooth out the discrepancies or to hide them; the component parts are viewed as essentially complementary, not contradictory; all belong to a full telling. This whole is achieved in large measure through a taken-for-granted procedure in the ancient near eastern world of cutting scrolls and sewing in new material – a practice very similar to the cut-and-paste kind of editing our computers make possible.[8]

But of course as a student of myth I am also interested in the component parts that are brought together in the redacted text – in how exploration of their *sitzen-im-leben* makes visible the different concerns dominant in different periods of Hebrew history. Early on "source theory" arose as a kind of attack on the Bible. In the late 18th c. the recognition that the use of different names for God, *Elohim* and *YHVH*, and different names for the mountain of revelation, *Sinai* and *Horeb*, implied different authorship and thus *human* authors served to challenge orthodox belief in divine authorship. Now, however, it enhances our appreciation of the artistry of the Bible's parts and whole, of its mythic power – and enables us to watch the *development* of this myth system, to discover how a particular way of retelling the story reflects the needs/fears/hopes/experiences of a particular community at a particular time.

In the *Book of Exodus*, for example, the earliest strand (labeled "J" by biblical scholars because this writer consistently speaks of God as YHVH –

or JHVH) presents Moses as a prophet/liberator figure who had the courage to challenge the Pharoah's exploitation of the Hebrew slaves – as the writer may have hoped someone might be brave enough to confront a contemporary Israelite king's oppression of his own people. For another slightly later strand (by an author referred to as "E" because here God is called "Elohim") Moses is primarily a miracle-worker, like the kind of leader who seems desperately needed as the Northern Kingdom finds itself under threat from the Assyrians. A century later, after the Northern Kingdom has been destroyed the "Deuteronomists" (or "D") picture Moses as a lawgiver, as having provided a detailed account of how God expects his people to live – in the hope that living thus might protect the beleaguered Southern Kingdom from the expanding Babylonian empire. It doesn't work, however; Jerusalem is overtaken, the temple destroyed, the community's leaders deported to Babylon. After the Babylonians are themselves defeated by the Persians and the exiled Israelites are allowed to return, the so-called Priestly writers ("P") imagined yet another Moses, one through whom God had shared how he wanted to be worshipped, for now Israel is primarily a *religious* community rather than an independent political nation. The redactors wove all these strands together as if to say: Moses is all of these and (implicitly) can provide us with an image of whatever new kind of leader we'll need in the new situations we'll confront. There is no one "real" Moses; it is the ongoing re-imagining, remything that makes him so important a figure.[9] We can discover a very similar process with respect to David as we take note of how the complex ambiguous David of *I* and *II Samuel* is transformed in the hagiographic representation of *Chronicles* (written when there are no longer Hebrew kings and David has come to be seen not only as the Ideal King of a nostalgically viewed past but also as the model of the Messiah, the longed-for future leader).

This kind of attention to the literary reshaping of the traditions opens us to an appreciation of how here as elsewhere it is remything that keeps the myth alive.

The Myth of Mythless Monotheism

For my concern, of course, is not with the Bible as literature *per se*, but as *mythic* literature – with biblical monotheism as a mythology.

Though this is something – as seems important to acknowledge at the outset – that is not generally recognized by either the adherents or the detractors of monotheism, nor by most students of myth. Monotheisms are myth-less, all seem to agree. For instance, neither the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* nor Yves Bonnefoy's *Mythologies* include Hebrew or Jewish or Christian or Muslim myths. Indeed, as Ivan Strenski and Bruce Lincoln have helped us see, from Max Muller's onwards myth study has tended to valorize the mythic and mystical religion of the "Aryans" as over against the ritual and institutional aspects of religion and has denigrated the "Semitic" monotheisms as non-mythic and thus inferior.[10] As Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it, the 19th c. scholars of myth "invented the mythical figures of the Hebrew and the Aryan" to whom they ascribed opposing though sometimes complementary roles:

> The Hebrew undeniably had the privilege of monotheism in his favor, but he was self-centered, static and refractory both to Christian values and to progress in culture and science. The Aryan, on the other hand, was invested with all the noble virtues that direct the dynamic of history: imagination, reason, science, arts, politics.
>
> The Hebrew was troublesome, disturbing, problematic: he stood at the very foundation of the religious tradition with which the scholars in question identified, but he was also alien to that tradition. … On him, therefore, focused the tensions, repudiations, and hostilities that the image of the Other elicits from individuals, as well as nations.[11]

Christianity was imagined as the great synthesis of these two clearly distinguished perspectives: the static monotheism (viewed as originating in a passive response to revelation, rather than as a product of the human mind) of the Hebrews with the more dynamic and imaginative energy of the Aryans (Olender 102).

But not only the detractors viewed biblical monotheism as myth-less! The dominant understanding within post Diaspora Judaism (and Christianity and Islam) has been in agreement. In response to the influence of Greek rationalism, Jewish interpreters since late antiquity have "attempted to

qualify, filter, or otherwise reinterpret the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God in the Hebrew Bible, and thus save Scripture from the merest tint of mythic irrationality and its so-called imaginative excesses" (Fishbane 3-4).

When there was no temple anymore, no priests, no land, what made the Jews Jews, what enabled them to survive as a separate people living in the midst of others, was their literature and the distinctive lifestyle it recommends – that is, the law. Beginning in the early Common Era the religious leaders were the rabbis, lay students of scripture whose authority came from their role in interpreting Torah regulations in a way that made those injunctions relevant in the predominantly urban Hellenistic world in which most Jews now lived, a world radically different from that of early Israel. In this new context ritual is made into legal obedience and severed from any intimate relation to myth; the prophets not the priests become the important forerunners. This anti-mythic attitude within Judaism was reinforced in the early modern era when (in response to the influence of the Enlightenment and Protestantism) Western European Jews adopted an aniconic, anti-ritual, rationalistic, ethics-focused view of genuine religiosity. Thus most Jewish scholars see myth as not fitting their conception of authentic Judaism.

Nevertheless both Jewish and Christian biblical scholars recognize that there *are* mythic elements in the Hebrew Bible (and even more so in the "oral tradition," the Mischnaic and Talmudic elaborations of Biblical laws and stories) – though they tend to view these as foreign to the Bible's own authentic perspective, as borrowed from neighboring cultures and then "improved." Once one moves beyond belief in the literal divine authorship of the Bible and can pick and choose what is "authentic" or "essential," the disconcerting mythic elements can be acknowledged but then dismissed as not intrinsic to monotheism. Thus much biblical scholarship has been directed to examinations of how the biblical writers transformed adopted mythic images and narratives, with (for example) how the creation story in *Genesis* 1 is a reworking of the Babylonian epic, the *Emuna Elish,* how the story of Noah and the flood echoes the flood story in the *Gilgamesh,* and with how in the prophetic texts old mythical images become only

metaphors.

Rabbinic Mythmaking

Those who see myth and monotheism as antithetical are likely to see the mythical element in Judaism as present primarily in the midrashic "oral" tradition and to dismiss the mythic elements as superstitious folk religion, old wives tales or as esoteric and consciously metaphorical as in Kabbalistic texts. Such scholars recognize that in midrash exactly what the 2nd c ce canon-makers tried to suppress flourishes, and view this as a clouding of "real" pure monotheistic Judaism. This dismissive view adopts the tactic of separating out the mythic elements within midrash so as to reach the authentic non-mythic "core" by emphasizing the distinction between *halakah* (law) and *haggadah* (legend). The legends are seen as separate from the central pure monotheism that is affirmed as having "always'" been the essence of Judaism.

Thus in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (and also in Graves and Patai's *Hebrew Myths*),[12] only non-canonical materials (from midrashic, medieval, and early modern periods) are assembled as "Hebrew Myth" – as though Lilith were mythic and Eve not. Ginzberg makes a clear distinction between the legal and legendary aspects of the Talmudic tradition and strongly believed that the mainspring of Judaism's genius lay in *halakah;* he devoted his life to disentangling this legal material and making it available to modern scholars. The legends were then sort of the leftovers from his siftings, gleanings that he then decided to publish separately for a more popular audience than the scholars addressed by his "real" work. Ginzberg is not afraid to acknowledge his delight in the playful, imaginative exuberance of this legendary material, although he sees it as clearly contrary to the austere monotheism of biblical faith. But from his perspective once the old gods are safely dead, there's no danger in allowing us to enjoy these mythic elaborations. "Living religion," he says, "requires the courage of images." He wants somehow to hang on to the vitality without impairing the purity of biblical monotheism.

Thus almost against his own will Ginzberg gives voice to a recognition

that mythmaking keeps the tradition alive and to an acknowledgment that alongside the more abstract philosophical and legal developments there was always also creative mythmaking going on. It is of course this recognition that lies behind Judaism's conviction that the so-called "oral law" (particularly in its written version in the Mishna and Talmuds) is an intrinsic part of the Torah. Thus there is a rabbinic tradition that God dictated the Torah to Moses by day and by night explained it. These "explanations," *midrash*, are what keeps the Bible alive.

Most literally, in Hebrew "midrash" means "to study," "to go in pursuit of"; by extension it is used to mean interpretation or exegesis. The valorization of midrashic elaboration grows out of a deep conviction that the Bible invites these expansions: scripture calls for meditation and application. "The rabbis said Solomon had 3000 parables to illustrate each and every word of Scripture and 1005 interpretations for each and every parable." Rabbinic mythmaking was the product of the *scholars* of early Judaism, not the untutored; it was always linked to scripture (though the "proof-texts" are often taken radically out of context) as inspired, imaginative exegesis. Midrash often seems transgressive, to go way beyond the biblical text, but its aim is to keep the Bible open and relevant; not to establish what the text meant *then* but what it might mean *now*. It means reading with "charity."[13]

The term "midrash" is often used to refer specifically to rabbinical interpretation going back to the intertestamental period and continuing into late medieval era (with Rashi, in the 11th c., and Maimonides in the 12th) but it is also used more broadly to refer to an ongoing tradition of elaboration of and argument with the tradition.[14] Its close readings and intense questioning engage the imagination and reveal the concerns and conflicts dominant in postexilic and later medieval Judaism – for like all myth-making and remaking midrashic elaboration has an ideological aspect.

Dialogue with one another and with generations both before and after is at the heart of the midrashic impulse. Even the written oral law is structured as conversation; it is the dialogue that is authoritative not any particular view. Interpretation as a social, conversational process matters in a way any particular interpretation doesn't. Midrash involves a tradition of face-to-

face transmission between teachers and their disciples; then the record of these encounters becomes the focus of later ones; it is a never-ending process.

Even when we come upon loving appreciation of midrashic mythmaking – as in Howard Schwartz's new book, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* – we often still find a reluctance to acknowledge that monotheism is itself mythic, often perceive a subtle avoidance of presenting the central affirmation – there is one god – as a myth. Thus Schwartz puts forward a broad encompassing definition of myth:

> Myth refers to a people's sacred stories about origins, deities, ancestors, and heroes. Within a culture, myths serve as the divine charter, and myth and ritual are inextricably bound. (xliv)

and explicitly rejects the notion that myth means "not true," affirming instead that myth articulates profound psychological and existential truths in symbolic language. In his introduction he writes:

> Every aspect of God was open to mythic speculation; God's size and appearance, what God does during the day and the night; what god's voice was like to those who heard it at mount Sinai; what god's relationship is like with his bride; how god prays; how god grieved over the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – despite the fact that he permitted that destruction to take place…

Despite the second commandment, he says, "rabbinic literature is full of anthropomorphic imagery of god, of god's hands, of god's eyes and ears, god walking, sitting, and speaking." He quotes Henry Slonimsky:

> Nowhere indeed has a God been rendered so utterly human, been taken so closely to man's bosom and, in the embrace, so thoroughly changed into an elder brother, a slightly older father, as here in the Midrash. The anthropomorphic tendency here achieves its climax. God has not merely become a man, he has become a Jew, an elderly, bearded Jew.[15]

Nevertheless, the examples of biblical and rabbinic mythology that Schwartz provides focus on the relatively rare instances where God is referred to in the plural – the use of the plural noun, *Elohim,* as a name for God; the "let us then go down and confound their speech" of the Tower of Babel story – or on stories about God's relation to the *Shekinah* (his female

counterpart) as erotic or as conflictual. In the section of the main body of the book that focuses on "Myths of God" Schwartz includes almost nothing from the Bible itself – only *Isaiah* 6 and *Daniel* 7. Instead, almost all the selections are to anthropomorphizing elaborations from the midrashic tradition: references to God's eyes and size, his breath, his face, his hands and arms, his voice and sword, his tears and prayers.

Though Schwartz clearly relishes the vividness of these images, he seems ultimately to understand them as allegory or metaphor. I miss Michael Fishbane's forthright question: What leads us to read biblical references to God riding on a mighty chariot with a sword of lightning in his hand or to God as delighting in the sweet smell of sacrifice as metaphorical and to read these same images as literal when we come across them in Greek or Mesopotamian myth? (Fishbane 17). I am also struck by how all the passages Schwartz includes speak of God's love and sympathetic grief – not his anger, his favoritism, or his impetuosity. This one-sided God is not to my mind a full-fledged mythic (or literary) character. Thus it is not at all clear that even for Schwartz myth is intrinsic to monotheism.

Whereas for Michael Fishbane rabbinic mythmaking is a continuation of biblical mythmaking. He writes at length, for example, about how the rabbis elaborate the simple sentence from the creation story in *Genesis* of God separating the water which was below from the water which was above into a complex narrative of the waters crying out in complaint at this painful separation, of their desperate attempts to find one another and mate, of their threats to destroy the world, of God finally subduing them and trampling them with his feet. But, he says, all this is no more mythic than the original biblical proclamation, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water that it may separate water from water" (Fishbane 112-131).

The Myth That Early Hebraic Faith was Monotheistic

Those who see myth and monotheism as antithetical often support what we might call a "myth of evolutionary progress" in the direction of universal ethical monotheism. They tend to posit a three-stage development from polytheism to tribal henotheism to universal monotheism, from a

mythic religion like those of surrounding people to a tribally specific cult focused on "our" god to a view of this god as the only "real," "true" god. Until very recently, however, the dominant view has been that the decisive shifts happened early – although afterwards there was often "back sliding," "whoring after other gods," syncretism. Now it is more generally acknowledged that it's a "myth" (in the sense of an untruth) that monotheism really was the living religion of Israel in the pre-exilic period.

Note how even in the Decalogue what was commanded was really monolatry: "Have no other gods before me" – *not* "There are no other gods." Indeed, the very necessity of making a covenant only makes sense in a polytheistic context. But even monolatry, even tribal henotheism, seems not to be a good description of what was really going on in the early periods of Israelite history when there was no sense of an exclusive Yahwism.[16] I am convinced by the scholarship that claims it is even inappropriate to describe the relation between worship of YHVH and of Canaanite deities as syncretism, since that would imply they were to begin with distinct systems – whereas there seems to be no evidence that El, Baal, or Asherah were objects of Israelite religious devotion separate from the cult of YHVH. Rather, these other deities were seen as part of the same religious system. The move toward monolatry represented a break with Israel's own past, a retrospective denial of her own earlier history.

Mark Smith describes the two processes involved in this gradual move: convergence and differentiation. The positive characteristics and powers, even some of the titles, earlier associated with other divine beings came to be attributed to YHVH; at the same time features clearly part of early Israelite cult were later – particularly after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, a disaster attributed to royal patronage of the Baal cult – rejected as Canaanite. As Ronald Hendel puts it, "The old-time religion became stigmatized as the foreign Other" (*Remembering Abraham* 27).

Because the focus on YHVH was primarily political, enjoined to validate transtribal loyalty to the central monarchy and weaken the influence of local fertility cults, matrilineal bonds and clan loyalty, the kings strongly encouraged the convergence, the inclusion of the attributes of other deities into the cult of the national cult. But for most people most of the time even

during the monarchical period (not just the peasants but also the kings and priests – as the introduction of altars and statues of other deities even into the Jerusalem Temple makes clear), worship of YHVH and other deities, perhaps particularly goddesses, was felt to be compatible.[17] That is, monotheism (in contrast with monolatry) is a late development; though upheld by some preExilic prophets, it essentially develops during the Exile, especially as a theory, a *theology*.

This doesn't mean that YHVH wasn't the most important god earlier on – but simply that he was not the only god and that worship of him did not entail an exclusion of the worship of other deities. To begin with, YHVH was primarily a national god, a warrior god, a god whose primary function was the protection of the nation against foreign incursion. There was so much of human life that fell outside his jurisdiction: the fertility of crops and human families, connection between the living and the dead, the sacred aspects of sexuality, epiphanic dreams. Thus it is not surprising that, particularly in times of peace, people turned to gods (and especially goddesses) associated with these aspects. It was primarily only in response to an inescapable threat to the continued existence of this people as a people in the 7th c. that "most important" became "only."

As primarily a warrior god, it is not surprising that YHVH was almost invariably described in masculine terms, imagined as a male figure, as a father (in powerful positive and negative ways) or as a warrior or king – or even as a husband whose bride is Israel. Some of the later prophets try to envision YHVH in trans-sexual, trans-gender terms, as not embodied, and there are a few late passages where he is described as female or as mother; but almost always he is emphatically male – but asexual, since as the only god there is no other deity with whom he might have intercourse. The Talmud introduces the image of the *Shekinah*, god's indwelling presence in the world; much later in kabbalistic myth the *Shekinah* comes to be spoken of as the feminine aspect of the divine. God and the *Shekinah* come to be viewed as two aspects of one divine being who as *the* god includes male and female qualities. And sometimes the *Shekinah* comes perilously close to acquiring mythic independence. There's a wonderful story, for instance, according to which she gets so angry at God's allowing the Jerusalem

temple to be destroyed that she leaves God and goes into exile with "her"(!) children.

Monotheism as Inherently Mythic

In contrast to Ginzberg or even Schwartz, Martin Buber insists: to dismiss the mythic elements as not intrinsic to monotheism entails the loss of the life-giving element in monotheistic religion. "Every living monotheism is filled with the mythical element and remains alive only so long as filled with this element" ("Myth in Judaism" 19). Buber cautions against not making our definition of myth too narrow to include Hebraic monotheism. Jewish myth, he says, is continuous with and yet distinct from other mythologies. Because Jewish monotheism views all things and events as utterances of God, the Jew of antiquity could tell a story only mythically: an event was only worth recounting when grasped in its divine significance.

In the chapter on myth in his *The Great Code: The Bible And Literature*, Northrop Frye offers a definition of myth broad enough to include biblical monotheism. He reminds us that myths take place in a mythology, as part of an interconnected group of myths – in contrast with folktales, which remain nomadic, don't imply one another and are not specific to a particular community as myths are. The real interest of myth, he says, is to draw a circumference around a human community and help shape its ongoing history (37). In this sense the Bible as a whole is clearly a myth-system: it presents us with a mythology that defines a community – we are the people who tell these stories. It follows then that YHVH is a mythic figure, *is* the stories told about him, the rituals dedicated to him.

That the biblical God (like all gods) is a mythical figure, an actor in a narrative, is sometimes recognized as true of the *Genesis* narratives – where God is described as physically present in the garden of Eden or as coming to Abraham's and Sarah's tent as an anonymous messenger or to Jacob as a threatening stranger – or even in *Exodus* where he speaks to Moses out of a fire-struck desert bush – but asserted no longer to be true for the prophets. Their God, it is claimed, is not a mythical figure: the God of the universe no longer walks to and fro in the garden nor wrestles with Jacob; he is no

longer visible as a concrete physical presence; he is only a *voice*. Nonetheless, he is still experienced as active and present, as having feelings and intentions, as demanding and responsive. This, too, is clearly still a myth.

Biblical monotheism is a myth, albeit in some ways a unique form of myth. Buber calls it "the myth of the I and Thou, the caller and the called, the self and the other." The Bible, he says, presents human life as a condition of being spoken to, addressed. We are created as response-able. God calls "YOU …" and we respond "Here I am," or, perhaps more often, "Please not me; please find someone else." The Bible, Buber says, presents the history of humankind as a conversation with God, as "the encounter of a group of people with the Nameless Being whom they, hearing his speech, and speaking to him in turn, ventured to name" (Myth 99). The Bible is not just an account of God's activities and how they affect humans, but also of how humans in turn affect God. The relationship to humankind is central to this God, not incidental as in most mythologies. He wouldn't be who he is apart from this relation.

Once you begin to think about it, you realize that this emphasis on the relation between God and us is an absolutely *necessary* and *central* correlative of the essential affirmation of monotheism, "The Lord our God, the Lord is One" – as Jack Miles makes evident in his wonderful book *God: A Biography*. Miles, reminding us that the Bible opens with God talking to himself, provides a poignant picture of the *loneliness* of this god and helps us see how monotheism implies loneliness. Without spouse or brother, parent, friend or child, this god needs us. Furthermore, Miles suggests that the interdependence of this god and humankind may lead almost inevitably to their endless complaints about one another (25). This god wants too much from us; he gets extraordinarily angry at what are supposedly his chosen people. In *Deuteronomy* 28 he utters horrifying threats against Israel if she fails to obey his commandments with joy and gladness: mothers will eat their newborn babies and the afterbirth because of their desperate hunger; the men will be put up for sale as slaves and no one will buy. Just moments after his cruel unbending rejection of his own people because of the golden calf episode, he describes himself as "the

lord! the lord! a god compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness." What an extraordinary contradiction! No wonder Miles views him as a "multiple personality."

For Miles the biblical god is a complex and ambiguous literary character who represents an amalgam of several personalities, a character suffering from an anxiety-inducing tension between his unity and his multiplicity. Miles describes the emergence of monotheism from polytheism as the story of a single god struggling with himself, a god who seems to act differently under his different names. He shows how as a result of a highly complex historical and literary process (I would, of course, say a highly complex *myth-making* process) several gods (the Canaanite High God El, a Midianite mountain God YHVH, the Canaanite Storm God Baal, the Mesopotamian personal god) are imagined into a unity dynamic with unresolved tensions. The biblical god *is* these tensions, these inner contradictions. The literary result is a character with a multiple personality who gradually becomes more unitary and more ethical. (Fishbane agrees, the multiple biblical names for God indicate a recognition of the volatility of the divine nature.)

Although it is important not to fall for the simple Christian antithesis between the wrathful Old Testament god and the loving god of Christianity (what, after all is so loving about the god of Matthew or the Book of Revelations?), it is important to recognize that this god is both the bitterly disappointed and punitive god of Amos and the forgiving god of Hosea – it is also important to acknowledge that the god of the Hebrew Bible is not an unambiguously attractive god. The rabbis imagined YHVH as a god who needed to pray, "May it be My will that My mercy overcome My anger and that My mercy dominate My attributes" (Schwartz 36). YHVH is a god quick to anger and slow to forgive, a god who plays favorites, supports the patriarchal oppression of women, gives humans dominion over the earth and condones genocide.

One of the most troubling stories in the Bible to my mind is the one which tells of God's unbending rejection of King Saul. The tale really begins when shortly after Saul has been anointed as the first king of Israel, YHVH orders him to kill all the Amalekites, men and women, infants and

sucklings, and all their flock. A surprisingly easy victory leads Saul to decide to spare King Agog and some of the herds, whereupon God announces: "I repent I made Saul king." From one day to the next Saul discovers he has been completely cut off from God (who has already chosen David to take his place.) He tries desperately to make some kind of contact, through prayer, dream, the consultation of oracles, all to no avail. Although Saul had earlier in response to God's demand expelled all the mediums and wizards from the kingdom, in his utter desolation in the dead of the night he makes his way to the house of a reputed "wise woman" and, overcoming her initial resistance, persuades her to call up the ghost of Samuel from the world of the dead. When Samuel comes up out of the earth, he cries out to Saul: "Why have you disturbed me? You've got to accept it: God has cut you off as he said he would. Because you did not obey, did not carry out his fierce wrath. He has given your kingdom to David and will give you and your house to be slain by the Amalekites."

Miles, as I have noted, envisions this volatile, unreliable, arbitrary god as having a multiple personality. In *Answer to Job* Jung writes about the many biblical passages which present contradictory images of YHVH, images of his wisdom and obtuseness, his rage and jealousy, his love and cruelty, his creativity and destructiveness. Everything is there, he says, and nothing is an obstacle to anything else. This god is not split; he's an antimony, a totality of inner opposites undifferentiated from one another. Jung acknowledges that pagans, polytheists, are at ease with divine inconsistency, but clearly believes that *this* god needs to become conscious, to distinguish his light and dark sides – a process that may initially issue in a one-sided identification with the light side as in Christianity but which ultimately requires a more mature integration (*Answer to Job* § 741). I'm less persuaded: to me what makes YHVH a god is the complexity. We don't call Aphrodite a multiple personality because she can both wreak havoc on Hippolytus and almost fall apart in her grief over the death of Adonis – nor Artemis because she ruthlessly expels Callisto but nurses the orphaned bear-cub at her breast. The world that confronts us is beautiful and terrifying; how can its god be less? A mythic god, it seems to me (as distinct from a theological or philosophical god – and the Bible is not


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prophecies. Their emphasis falls on the present as a time of decision, of choice; they call for a turning, re-turning. Though I have focused on the mythic aspects of the narrative parts of the Hebrew Bible, a look at the prophetic literature reveals a complex process of demythization (many of the prophets seem as aware as Marx of how myths can be used to bolster political power and oppression) and remythization (as they try to recover the dynamic inherent in the inherited metaphors, particularly exodus and covenant.) To read the Hebrew prophets is to see the mythic imagination at work. Of course, the prophets do not experience themselves as engaged in a deliberate, conscious reimagining of the tradition; *within* the myth the understanding is that what happens is that God speaks to and through them – a divine voice gives them a message to be shared with their community. Not that they are just microphones; they may resist, they may plead with god, they may persuade him; the relationship is once again dialogical – not mystical; it is not an experience of unitive ecstasy or merging. God is other, he is You; the prophets (to use Buber's phrases once again) are participants in the myth of the I and the Thou, the caller and the called, the self and the other. Out of this dialogical relationship between God and the prophets new images, new myths emerge: Amos's image of the imminent coming of the Day of YHVH, Hosea's vision of a new honeymoon, Isaiah's image of a messianic prince of peace, Second Isaiah's image of the suffering servant. Although the biblical tradition distinguishes between "true" and "false" prophets, the distinction has nothing to do with the literal fulfillment of predictions but rather with the articulation of images that served the long-run continuance of Israel's trust in God, with the provision of myths that sustain hope and give meaning enduringly.

The prophets announce that there are real alternatives and that what will happen in the future depends on us, on how we respond *now*. God has a goal, a vision, for us: that we might learn to live together in peaceful and just ways. But its fulfillment depends on us. The hoped-for consummation is to take place *in* history and *through* history, that is through human doing, by way of the human response to God's calling. The past is over, done with, irretrievable. The present is a time of decision, of choice, response-ability. The future is genuinely open, is the realm of possibility. Time