

## Mythology and the Bible

What do you think when I say the following? *"The Bible is full of myths."*

### **I. Claims That the Bible Is a Book of Myths**

- A. Accusations by atheists as a dismissive, conversation stopping technique.
  - e.g. *"To me [Christianity] was all nonsense based on that profane compilation of fables called the Bible."* (Bill Haywood, member of the executive committee of the Socialist Party of America, 1869-1928)
  - e.g. *"Evangelicals cite Genesis to challenge the science taught in classrooms, but don't like to talk about those Old Testament books with monsters and magic."* (Newsweek, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's A Sin" by Kurt Eichenwald, 12/23/14)
- B. Accusations by espoused, yet critical "believers" in an attempt to appear intellectual
  - e.g. *"It is impossible to use electric light & the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits."* (Rudolf Bultmann, German Lutheran theologian, 1884-1976)
- C. Such accusations rarely, if ever, define whether the Bible is partly mythological and if so, how much, and who determines what is true and what is false. Such opens Pandora's Box of subjective interpretation, making the interpreter the penman rather than the Holy Spirit inspired authors.
- D. Such accusations often carry numerous untrue assumptions such as that the Bible cannot be scientifically or historically validated or that all religious traditions are mythological.
- E. Such accusations also begin in atheistic and anti-theistic circles, often academic, and invade and corrupt the minds of those who lack vigilance. Supplementing technical and esoteric definitions to words often convolutes the matter as well. Such leavening influence is reflected by active preachers in churches of Christ.

### **II. Definition of "Myth"**

- A. In English
  - 1. Merriam Webster – a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon; parable, allegory; a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; an unfounded or false notion; a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence; the whole body of myths
  - 2. Dictionary.com – a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature; stories or matter of this kind; any invented story, idea, or concept; an imaginary or fictitious thing or person; an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution.
- B. In Greek (5x in the New Testament)

1. Vine's – *A story, narrative, fable, fiction...The word is used of Gnostic errors and of Jewish and profane fables and genealogies...Muthos is to be contrasted with aletheia, truth, and with logos, a story, a narrative purporting to set forth facts, e.g. Matt. 28:15, a "saying" (i.e., an account, story, in which actually there is a falsification of facts); Luke 5:15, R.V., "report".*
2. Thayer's – *A speech, word, saying; a narrative, story; a true narrative; a fiction, a fable; universally, an invention, falsehood*

C. Examples of Myths:

1. The Babylonian storm god Marduk wrestled with the chaotic sea deity Tiamat and after defeating her, made all of creation from her corpse.
2. The ancient warrior Achilles was dipped into a river but his ankle did not get submerged. As such, his heel became his weak point and the Greek gods redirected an arrow during the Trojan Wars that killed him by his heel.
3. If you stand in front of a mirror and repeatedly whisper "Bloody Mary", an apparition of Mary Tudor will appear.
4. Elvis Presley didn't really die, but is in the Witness Protection Program.

### III. How the Bible Views Myths

A. The Bible does specifically use the word myth, the exact origin of our current term which is simply transliterated from the Greek word *muthos*. It also uses synonyms very much akin to the negative definition of myth.

1. 1 Timothy 1:3-7 – *"As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions."*
2. 1 Timothy 4:6-10 – *"In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers."*
3. 2 Timothy 4:1-5 – *"I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and*

*His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”*

4. Titus 1:10-16 – *“For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true. For this reason, reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.”*
5. 2 Peter 1:16-21 – *“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’— and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So, we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”*

#### B. Observations:

1. From a biblical perspective, myths are to be seen in the same category as old wives’ tales, deceptions, and evil speculations. Myths are not seen in the category of figurative language which was employed by biblical writers and by Jesus Himself.
2. In fact, the Bible sets myths in direct opposition to truth. Mythologizing the Bible calls into question God’s veracity who has revealed to us all truth.
3. Furthermore, myths are used to elevate one over others. Myths were the means by which some Jewish Christians exalted themselves above other Jews and also Gentile Christians. Such appeals are in direct contradiction to the mind of Christ and Christians.

#### IV. Does the Bible Ever Use or Appeal to Myths?

A. Yes and no.

1. The Bible often mocks the myths of pagans with intentional and assumed-to-be-understood mythical language, often in the midst of literary poetry or prophecy (e.g. Hades, Tartarus, River of Life).
2. The Bible also uses actual truths that have been misrepresented by or mislabeled as myths (e.g. Behemoth/Leviathan in Job 40-41; cherubim).
3. Myths have arisen in regards to biblical materials or that have borrowed elements from biblical materials (e.g. supernatural strength of Samson, floating axes, angel-human hybrids, etc.).
4. The Bible does use figurative language, a new definition of myth made by sociologists but not original to the meaning, but consistently makes a distinction between figures and literal treatments.
5. In some cases, figurative language is developed by means of references to mythology, but only as a poetic way of describing an actual truth, never to affirm a fiction as a fact (e.g. Rahab the dragon in Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps. 87:4; 89:10; Is. 30:7; 51:9).
6. Antiquated verbiage in translation has caused confusion (e.g. unicorn).
7. The Bible does not make up fictional stories by means of mythology in order to provide explanation for cultural origins, despite common accusations regarding the Creation Account (Gen. 1-2), the fall of mankind (Gen. 3), the many languages of people (Gen. 11:1-9), the call of Abraham (Gen. 12), the ascendance of Israel out of Egypt & the ten plagues (Exodus), etc.

B. If the Bible did employ fictional accounts regarding these or other matters, then the trustworthiness of the Bible would be trampled upon. Advocacy for biblical mythology makes Jesus a myth and makes Christianity a farce.

C. In our next few classes, we will focus on a few demonstrations of the Bible's interaction with mythology. Next time we plan to consider the myths of Hercules and the facts of Jesus. In two weeks, Lord willing, we will consider the Bible's mockery of Apollo Myth in Rev. 12 & Nero Redivivus Myth in Rev. 13.

## V. Formulating A Response

- A. How do we determine if someone is sincere or simply dismissive when they claim the Bible is full of myths? Show and expose philosophical pre-commitments.
- B. How would you respond to: Magic and monsters? Superhumans? Virgin birth? Rahab and Leviathan? Angels and people having sexual relations? Giants? Unicorns?
- C. What points should be made about the detrimental impact of the sociological redefinition of myths?
- D. Know the textual evidence that offsets the possibility of corruption.
- E. Distinguish between biblical mockery of pagan myths, figurative language, etc.
- F. Study the historical and scientific reliability of the Scriptures.

## Supplement – “Myth” in the Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology

Myth. The word “myth” (Gk. *muthos*) only appears five times in the Bible, all in the New Testament, and all but one in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16). All of these were translated in the King James Version as “fable.” More recent versions (such as rsv, nasb, neb, and niv) have almost uniformly used the word “myth.”

**In all of these occurrences, the context makes it plain that Paul and Peter are using the term in its common sense of something false. Thus, it is what is contrary to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:4), particularly in relation to asceticism and spirit-worship (1 Tim. 4:7). Those who leave the Word of God and its sound teachings will choose myths and not truth (2 Tim. 4:4). If people are to have a sound faith, they must not listen to myths taught by those who reject the truth (Titus 1:14). Finally, the gospel narratives are not fictional tales, but actual eyewitness reports (2 Peter 1:16). In each case, *muthos* is used to describe something that is contrary to the truth, whether that truth be the doctrines relating to Christian behavior or the accounts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.**

What is not clear is whether any of these references have in mind the ancient legends of the gods that we commonly think of in reference to the term “myth.” With regard to the references in the Pastoral Epistles, the answer seems to be no. In fact, in one case (Titus 1:14), they are specifically labeled “Jewish myths,” which certainly did not include any legends of the gods. While it is possible that 2 Timothy 4:4 may speak of Christians who will abandon the truth of their religion and turn to the pagan religions, the two references in 1 Timothy (1:4 and 4:7), along with the one in Titus, seem to be referring to the kind of Jewish mysticism described in Colossians 2:16–23. This was an elitist kind of piety that emphasized secret religious knowledge and rigorous self-denial. Part of the secret knowledge involved knowing the secret names of a whole hierarchy of angels (Col. 2:18; 1 Tim. 1:4, “genealogies”). This concept of a hierarchy of angels was almost certainly the result of the contamination of Jewish thought by pagan thought, but there is little reason to think that Paul was thinking of that derivation when he called these ideas “myths.” It appears that he is only describing them as falsehoods. So, in Goodspeed’s version of the New Testament the translation used is “fictions.”

It is somewhat more likely that Peter does have in mind the classical myths when he says that the Gospel accounts are not myths, but eyewitness reports. On this reading, he would be saying that the gospel narrative is not like the pagan myths. The myths are merely fictional and fantastic tales, but the gospel, while it incorporates the miraculous, actually took place. At this place the New International Version has “stories” and the New English Bible has “tales.” But even here where there may be some connotation of the pagan stories of the gods, the chief emphasis is upon falsehood versus truth.

**This unrelenting use of “myth” by the Bible as a synonym for lies and falsehood is ironic, given the present positive valuation put on the term. While the common person still uses the word as the Greeks did, to describe something that is untrue, this is not the way sociologists of religion use it. With the rediscovery of the ancient world, especially in the nineteenth century, there arose a certain fascination with the stories of the gods and with the power of those stories to convey a meaningful vision of reality to those who accepted them. A number of studies of myth were undertaken, one of the most famous being Frazier’s The**

**Golden Bough. These studies suggested that myth should be understood as a vehicle by which extrascientific truth may be expressed. Of course, this represents an almost complete reversal in the understanding of myth. Instead of being false because of its failure to conform to a scientifically derived view of reality, it is true precisely because it does not!**

According to this view, whenever a people express their views of reality in other than mechanistic and naturalistic terms, they are speaking mythically. Thus, to speak of God as a person who causes the rain to fall is to speak in mythical terms. While the statement may be “true” in some sense, it is false, scientifically speaking, because it cannot be verified. Used in this way, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a myth” would say that while the body of Jesus remained in the tomb and was not seen by the disciples, the narrative serves to express the Christian conviction that the human spirit perseveres after the death of the body. This point of view would argue that ultimate truth has no connection with historical facts.

**As this way of defining myth has become more popular, it has become increasingly common, even among some Christians, to refer to the Bible as part of the world’s great mythic literature. The reasons for this are not hard to find. First, there are the questions about the historical reliability of the Bible. If it can be granted that historical reliability is really of no consequence to the meaning or value of the Bible, those questions are no longer troublesome. A second reason is the growing distaste for exclusivism of all sorts. If the Bible can be defined as one more of the world’s religious tales, then its embarrassing particularity can be disposed of. Finally, although the death of the enlightenment is frequently announced, the idea that there is a personal deity who transcends all our means of containing him, and to whom we are accountable, is still unacceptable to many. If the language can be reduced to a merely figurative expression for a generalized life force that inhabits the universe, it is more palatable.**

**The response of Paul or Peter—or Isaiah—to the idea that the Bible is myth is unmistakable. They insist that their theology is true precisely because it has been validated in the world of time and space, the world of facts. They would vigorously resist any attempt to make their assertion about what God has done in this world merely figurative. But beyond this, the Bible is at odds with the ancient stories of the gods at every point. This is not an enclosed, cyclical existence where the forces of nature have been turned into deities. It is not a shadowy stage where timeless, placeless stories of the gods must be acted out in order to appropriate divine power for an otherwise meaningless existence. Rather, God has broken into the world of time and space in unique, nonrepeateable events that have revealed his character and his grace. Real human persons have seen the evidence, have received divine interpretations of that evidence, and have recorded it all under supernatural guidance. As Peter would tell us, these are not myths; they are the reports of people who have been visited by the holy God. Whatever the Bible is, it is not a myth.**

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Bibliography. B. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*; T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*; G. Stahlin, *TDNT*, 4:762–95.