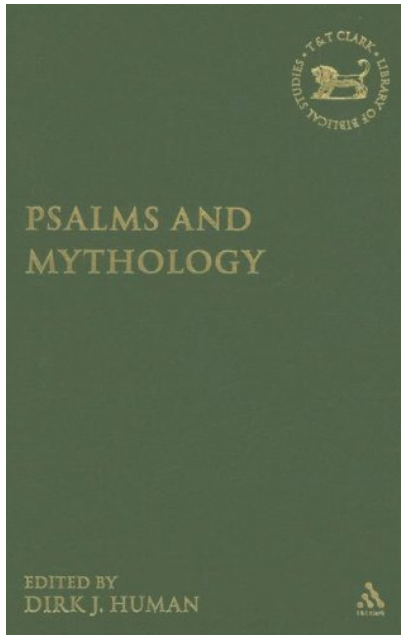


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Psalms and Mythology

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The fifteen essays that form the present volume have their genesis in a 2005 meeting of the ProPsalm (Project Psalm) seminar. Held at the University of Pretoria, this seminar brought together scholars from Europe and Africa to discuss the topic “Psalms and Mythology.” A brief preface summarizes the contribution of each essay, while helpful reference and author indices conclude the volume.

In the volume’s first essay, “Myth as Paradigm to Read a Text,” Flip Schutte explores the nature of myth and its value as a lens through which biblical texts may be read. Schutte characterizes myth as “the language in which an experience with God was expressed” (3), arguing that myth provides the medium through which divine and human actors can interact. Viewed in this way, myth cannot be limited to texts such as Gen 1–11. Instead, myth should be regarded as a pervasive category in the Bible, encompassing all those texts that involve transcendent elements. The Psalms, then, may be regarded as quintessentially mythic texts, since they describe the spiritual experiences of the psalmists. Schutte emphasizes the need to approach mythic texts first within their own worldview (“tautegorically,” following Cassirer) and only then translate them into a modern context by interpreting them symbolically and metaphorically. Unclear in Schutte’s discussion is

whether distinctions can be drawn between different types of mythic texts in the Bible. Granting that the Bible was “written against the backdrop of a mythical worldview” (1), were there texts that ancient Israelite authors would also have recognized as “mythic”? That is to say, would the Israelites themselves have distinguished between “historical” and “mythic” texts and, if so, how?

In “From Myth to Theological Language,” Alphonso Groenewald also explores issues of theory and definition as they relate to myth. Groenewald observes that in recent decades the association of myth solely with pagan contexts has given way to a greater recognition of myth’s function as an important “theological medium” in the Bible. He argues that the biblical writers use the symbolic language of myth to point toward transcendent realities that cannot be described otherwise. Through their frequent use and reuse by these writers, myths have come to “permeate virtually every layer of the biblical tradition” (18), requiring exegetes to be particularly sensitive to the presence of mythical motifs. Despite its pervasiveness in the Hebrew Bible, Groenewald, like many previous scholars, struggles to find an adequate definition of myth. Although he devotes the first half of his essay to reviewing various proposals for such a definition, he concludes somewhat disappointingly: “It seems impossible and even undesirable to try to find a single exclusive definition for the term ‘myth’” (17). Perhaps as a result of this reticence to clearly define myth, Groenewald’s own treatment of myth in the Hebrew Bible seems to alternate uncomfortably between myth understood as the biblical authors’ borrowing and redeploying motifs from the myths of their ancient neighbors and myth understood as the linguistic medium that allows humans to encounter transcendent realities.

In his essay, “Myth and Hebrew Ethics in the Psalms,” Eckart Otto argues that the center of Hebrew ethics is found not in Israel’s particular values and norms (which are found elsewhere in the ancient Near East) but in the “idealistic framework and structure which legitimizes” those norms (26). To discover this idealistic framework, Otto turns to the mythic background of the biblical psalms and to the myths of Israel’s ancient neighbors. Analyzing the Enuma Elish, for example, Otto argues that this myth defines the successful life as one in which a person follows Marduk, the god who is represented by the king of Babylon. Ethical norms are thus mediated by the state and often equated with loyalty to the state. In the biblical worldview, however, the state’s participation in ethical decision making takes a back seat to the role of the temple and especially the individual. As Ps 93 suggests, God does conquer the forces of chaos in the same fashion as Marduk. Israel’s God, however, cannot be emulated through loyalty to the king. God is followed, rather, by obeying his *edut*.

In “YHWH Unlimited: Theo-Mythology in the Psalms and Realism vs. Non-realism in Philosophy of Religion,” Jaco Gericke focuses particularly on the relationship between the

“theo-mythical motifs” in the Psalms and the world outside the text. The lens through which he addresses this relationship is the philosophy of religion debate between realism and nonrealism. Gericke defines realism as the notion that “the divine exists independently of human beliefs or discourse in which the depiction takes place” (46). Within the realist camp, he distinguishes between “naïve realists,” for whom the biblical text describes a deity “who conforms exactly to the depiction of his character in the biblical discourse” (46), and “critical realists,” for whom the mythic depictions of YHWH in the text do refer to an “extra-textual divine reality” but are entirely “relativized by historical and cultural contexts” (48). Under the heading of nonrealism, Gericke discusses approaches to the text in which the mythological discourse in the Psalms does not refer to any divine being that exists independently of the text. Instead, these elements are purely reflections of the ideals and values of the texts’ authors. To use Gericke’s analogy, for naïve realists the text is a window to the world of the divine, for critical realists it is a painting, and for nonrealists it is only a mirror. Gericke evaluates the pros and cons of each of these positions but ultimately stops short of endorsing a particular approach.

Phil Botha’s contribution is entitled “Intertextuality and the Interpretation of Psalm 1.” As the title suggests, this essay is less concerned with mythological elements in the Psalter per se than with the place of Ps 1 within the collection. Using the lens of intertextuality, Botha challenges a number of commonly held views concerning the psalm. He maintains that Ps 1 was not placed at the beginning of the Psalter to cast the rest of the collection as the equivalent of Torah. Further, he argues the psalm does not define the manner in which the rest of the book is to be read. Finally, he argues that the psalm does not argue for the replacement of temple by Torah but rather sees the two as working together. Botha does mention mythological elements in the psalm, particularly as he explores the temple and garden imagery. Given the focus of the volume as a whole, however, readers could certainly profit from a more thorough discussion of these features.

In “Theological-Mythological Viewpoints on Divine Sonship in Genesis 6 and Psalm 2,” Emmanuel Usue evaluates various proposals for the identity of the son(s) of God in these controversial texts. Usue himself opts for regarding the sons of God in Gen 6 as human kings, rulers, or leaders. In Ps 2, he suggests that the son of God language alludes both to the ancient Near Eastern conception of kings as sons of the gods and to an eschatological king who will be the Messiah. Although the potential mythological echoes in these passages do not dominate Usue’s essay, he does draw attention to them as he evaluates various interpretive positions. Usue’s essay differs somewhat from the other essays in the book in that he employs a more confessional approach to the text. In countering the suggestion that the sons of God in Gen 6 could have been angels, for example, the author appears to hold that the serpent in Gen 3 was “a fallen angel who disguised himself as a serpent” (85) and that an angelic interpretation is out of bounds because Jesus asserted

that angels do not marry (Matt 22:30). Evidence of this sort fits somewhat uncomfortably with the approaches taken elsewhere in the volume.

Gerlinde Baumann's "Psalm 74: Myth as the Source of Hope in Times of Devastation" begins with a detailed examination of this important psalm. Baumann concludes that the psalm is structured in three parts. The first and last parts operate on the level of space, depicting Israel and Israel's God as completely surrounded by enemies. The middle part provides a "counterimage" in which the psalmist's focus shifts from space to time. There the psalmist turns to timeless images of Elohim's defeating dragons and overcoming the waters that threatened Israel's escape from Egypt. The timelessness of the *Chaoskampf* is evident in the fact that it both occurs in the ancient past and yet must reoccur on a continual basis. The exodus traditions are also made timeless by their being recounted in highly mythical terms. In considering the question of "mythical truth," Baumann argues that neither the ancient Near East generally nor the ancient Israelites specifically privileged historical traditions over nonhistorical traditions. In the case of Ps 74, she contends that the mythical traditions provided Israel with an outlet for hope when "every visible sign of God's power and his history with his people was ruined" (101).

Beat Weber's "They Saw You, the Waters—They Trembled" (Psalm 77:17b): The Function of Mytho-poetic Language in the Context of Psalm 77" is one of the highlights of the volume. In his study, Weber offers a detailed analysis of the form and structure of Ps 77, a composition he connects with the Asaphites' attempt to come to grips with the fall of the northern kingdom during Hezekiah's reign. Weber gives particular attention to the function of 77:16–21 within the psalm. Arguing that these verses are best read from the center outward, he connects 77:18–19 with both the theophanic character of a thunderstorm and, somewhat less convincingly, with the theophany at Sinai. This thunderstorm theophany expands outwardly to the next frame, 77:17 and 20, in which God triumphs over the chaotic waters. Finally, in the outer frame, 77:16 and 21, the victory over the waters is tied to God's deliverance of his people at the Reed Sea. Thus, this pivotal section progresses from theophany to mythic victory to salvation history. Decisive for Weber's interpretation of the psalm is 77:20's assertion, "but your tracks were not known." Weber highlights the thematic link that this line forms with the lament in the first half of the psalm. Like the thunderstorm that is at times only an echo and at times frighteningly close, God is depicted by the psalmist as a powerful deliverer who nevertheless remains elusive.

In "Harry Potter's Preservation and Horus' Protective Power: The Semiotic of the Horus-Stelae and the Semantic of Psalm 91:13," Hans Steymans posits a connection between the Septuagint's translation of Ps 91:13 and the ubiquitous Horus stelae found in Egypt. Noting the divergence between the LXX of Ps 91:13 and the Hebrew text, Steymans

suggests that the translator has been influenced by the Horus stela's depiction of two very different models of domination. On the one hand, Horus peacefully rules over the two crocodiles who serve as his porters. On the other hand, he violently dominates the lion, snake, scorpion, and gazelle as he hunts and kills them. Steymans argues that the translator of Ps 91:13 replaces the Hebrew's lion in the first half with a reptile to preserve this distinction in modes of domination. By reserving the lion for the more aggressive "trampling" in the second half of the verse and by coupling the lion with a dragon, the translator preserves the stela's reference to Horus's corresponding domination of these creatures. Further, by using the ambiguous terms "asp" ("shielded") and "basilisk" ("little king") in the first, more neutral "treading" section of the verse, the translator provides for an echo of Horus's crocodilian companions.

The volume's editor, Dirk Human, contributes the essay entitled "Psalm 93: Yahweh Robed in Majesty and Mightier Than the Great Waters." Human provides an extensive catalogue of the mythological echoes in the psalm, concluding, "Mythic terms, concepts, and allusions are omnipresent in Ps 93" (168). As Human notes, most of these mythical allusions are focused on the notion of YHWH's kingship. Drawing heavily on the mythological "images and concepts" of the ancient Near East, the psalmist captures aspects of YHWH's character that would otherwise be inexpressible. Importantly, Human also emphasizes the connection between myth and cult. In the rituals of the cult, mythic realities are experienced firsthand, and the distinctions between myth and history recede into the background.

In "Some Remarks on Yahweh's Protection against Mythological Powers in Psalm 121," Leonard Maré contends that strong mythological overtones inform the background of the psalm. Maré begins with an overview of the structure of the psalm, highlighting the importance the psalmist places on YHWH's role as creator. That creation traditions would be marshaled as a basis for confidence reveals something of the nature of the enemies the psalmist faces. Since the act of creation was first and foremost one of subduing the mythological forces of chaos and showing YHWH's superiority over other gods, it follows that YHWH's role as creator would be invoked here because these same forces now threaten the psalmist. Thus, Maré contends that the mountains to which the psalmist lifts his eyes are dangerous to the psalmist because they are the dwelling place of the gods. The sun and moon that YHWH will prevent from striking the psalmist are not merely natural phenomena but are the deities well known from Israel's neighbors. Even in the face of such powerful threats, however, Maré argues that the psalmist need not fear. Unlike the annually dying Baal, the psalmist's god, YHWH, would not slumber or sleep and would protect him from all evil.

Gert Prinsloo's contribution is entitled "Historical Reality and Mythological Metaphor in Psalm 124." After an extensive treatment of Ps 124's text, morphology, syntax, and poetic structure, Prinsloo turns to the place of the psalm within the Songs of Ascents and Book 5 of the Psalter. Prinsloo maintains that the Songs of Ascents represent an independent collection of psalms produced by a marginalized group of Levites in the late Persian period. He suggests that Ps 124 holds a special place within this collection, as it uses highly charged mythological language to describe "the historical reality of the post-exilic community as an anti-creation, a return to the state of chaos prior to YHWH's creative intervention" (181). Prinsloo highlights the mythological overtones in the psalmist's images of beasts of prey, raging waters, and a trapped bird, arguing that these three images "refer to a single concept, namely, death" (182). Using death as a metaphor for the new exile experienced by this forsaken group of Levites, the psalmist turns to YHWH, creator of heaven and earth, the one who can once again defeat the forces of chaos and offer them renewed deliverance.

Paul Kruger's "Symbolic Inversion in Death: Some Examples from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near Eastern World" is not specifically tied to the Psalms, though it does touch upon the Psalter at various points. Examining texts from across the ancient Near East, Kruger observes that a key element in descriptions of death is the inversion of the norms of regular life. Whereas normal life takes place in the world "above," the netherworld is "below." The light that illumines regular life is in death turned to darkness. The joys of earthly existence are replaced by misery. Confinement and silence replace freedom and song. In some cases, the dead are even literally inverted, forced to walk upside down in the afterlife. Kruger rightly notes that many of these inverted elements appear in the Hebrew Scriptures as well, especially in the reflections of Job, Qoheleth, and the Psalms.

Like the preceding essay, Marius Nel's "Myth and Daniel 7" is only tangentially related to the Psalms. After an eloquent description of the nature of myth and its role in the development of human culture, Nel turns his attention to Dan 7. Nel notes that the vision recounted in this chapter has long been shown to have significant connections with the mythological motifs of Israel's ancient neighbors. After cataloguing the various proposals for mythic connections in the vision, Nel looks more carefully at the Anzu Myth and the Enuma Elish. Although Dan 7 shares elements of both of these myths and the related Canaanite combat myths, Nel maintains that the vision does not systematically depend on any of these traditions. He concludes that the vision is "conflated and eclectic" and may perhaps be dependent on an as yet undiscovered account. In keeping with what Nel regards as a characteristic feature of apocalypticism, the author of Dan 7 does not simply rework an existing myth. Instead, he employs a variety of motifs, each with distinctive associations, to form a new vision.

Liswanisu Kamuwanga contributes the final essay: "Sacral Kingship and Myth in Africa." Kamuwanga begins with a survey of noteworthy African traditions concerning kingship. In this survey he catalogues the variety of African traditions related to matters such as the origins of kingship, enthronement practices, the death and burial of monarchs, and royal duties and privileges. Informed by this background, Kamuwanga then turns his attention to notions of kingship in the ancient Near East and in Israel. He gives particular attention to Israel's enthronement practices, especially as they appear in the Psalms, and to the relationship the Israelite kings shared with God vis-à-vis their Egyptian and Mesopotamian counterparts. Kamuwanga concludes his study with a proposed trajectory for future comparison of African and Israelite kingship.

The essays collected in *Psalms and Mythology* will prove helpful to scholars interested in either subject. While each scholar represented in the volume approaches the subject in a different way, the combined effect is to underscore the tremendous importance of mythological themes for understanding both the Psalms and the rest of the biblical literature. If there is a criticism to be lodged against the volume, it is simply that the volume's success in highlighting the importance of myth in the Psalms is not matched by similar success in clearly defining myth or explaining how the biblical authors themselves would have perceived it. Would the biblical authors have drawn distinctions between "myth" and "history," for instance, and if so, how would their readers have been alerted to these distinctions? On a final, practical note, the editor and contributors are to be commended for the text's smooth and highly readable English. This is particularly impressive given the diverse language backgrounds of the volume's contributors.