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Myths, Visions, and Related Literary Forms in the Gospels

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Are the Gospels myth or history? Some of my fellow scholars in religious studies argue that the Gospels consist of myths, while my colleagues in New Testament studies tend to view them as a form of history or biography. While there is no right definition of any particular term, some definitions are more helpful than others. In this article I will argue for a formal definition of “myth” similar to that used by many folklorists and explain why following this definition it is misleading to use the term “myth” to characterize Gospel texts, and why it better suits Revelation. I will also briefly note the central differences between the genre to which the Gospels belong (sacred history) and modern academic history, highlighting the place of the imagination and of interior visions in the Gospel texts. I will also discuss why miracle stories in the Gospels should not be classified as myths. I do not intend a thorough overview of the debates regarding myth and the Bible as other scholars have already done that.¹

Authoritative Ahistorical Narratives

I suggest that if we judge that an author intends for his readers to consider his narrative as true and authoritative but as having happened outside history, we may classify that narrative as a myth. By authoritative I mean that the narrative establishes or legitimates an institution or practice. Ahistoricity distinguishes myths from legends; in the case of legends, the narrator usually specifies where and when the event was supposed to have occurred.² Ahistoricity is of course also that which distinguishes myths

¹ The scholarly debate from Schleiermacher’s day to the present is the subject of a monograph by Dorrien 1997, and has also been summarized by Pannenberg 1973, Dunn 1979, Oden 1992, and Evans 1993 among others.

² The term legend, like myth, has been used in different ways. I find Tangherlini’s definition helpful: “Legend, typically, is a short (mono-)episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified,

from historical accounts; it signals to the reader that what follows is an imaginative composition.³ We determine whether the author intended to write a historical account on the basis of how he constructed his narrative including the setting and kinds of actors, and especially his choice and use of sources. Narratives about the creation of the world are clearly not historical accounts, as there is no possible eyewitness account that the author could be basing his work on. Although these accounts are presented as true, they are set outside history and have their basis in someone's imagination, and may therefore be labelled myths. To the extent that other religious narratives tell of events occurring outside history, they too are termed myths.⁴

If ahistoricity determines which texts are myths, there is not much in the way of myth in the New Testament. While the first chapters of Genesis may be said to include creation myths, there are no creation myths in the New Testament. John, Paul and the author of Hebrews speak of the Son or the Word existing before the creation of the world (John 1:1–4, 10; 17:5; 1 John 1:1; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2) but these references do not constitute creation myths, as we do not find any narratives about Jesus (or the Word) actually creating the world in New Testament.⁵ Similarly, while several New Testament authors refer to the second coming and judgment day, which mark the end of history (Mark 13:32; Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess 5:2), there are no extended narratives about judgment day. Revelation is

historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs" (Tangherlini 1990, 385). See also Pannenberg 1973, 4, who notes that "the historical nature" of "sagas" [i.e., legends] contributes to their "lack of general validity in the strict sense," unlike what is the case with myths.

³ This ahistoricity may have been intended to signal to the audience that the norms established in the account remain binding. It may also be evidence that these compositions have been patterned on dreams and visions.

⁴ This corresponds to one of G. L. Bauer's definition of myth as summarized by Strauss 1846, 25: a narrative is recognizable as a myth "when it presents an historical account of events which are either absolutely or relatively beyond the reach of experience, such as occurrences connected with the spiritual world, and incidents to which, from the nature of the circumstances, no one could have been witness." To speak of events that are "relatively beyond the reach of experience" is of course hopelessly vague. Unlike Bauer and Schelling I see no reason why the term "myth" should be restricted to oral narratives, nor why oral narratives should automatically be classified as myths. (See Strauss 1846, 33.)

⁵ These passages may have been intended as polemical replies to the position that Jewish wisdom literature gave the Torah rather than attempts at describing Jesus' role in creation.

that New Testament text which best fits the category of myth as I define it. It tells of events involving non-human actors without offering any overt connection to history. While the text may refer to historical personages under the guise of various mythical creatures, and while it may reflect historical events such as Nero's suicide,⁶ the work as a whole was not intended to provide a historical account of any kind. Its message is presented as true and authoritative (affirming that God will establish his kingdom and encouraging believers to be faithful in their witness even in face of death), and the work can therefore be classified as myth. The author of Revelation intentionally echoes Genesis, appropriating motifs such as the serpent (Rev 12:9; 20:2; Gen 3:1) and the tree of life (Rev 22:2; Gen 3:22). Whereas the creation account in Genesis ended with humankind being separated from God and facing death, Revelation ends with God making his home among mortals, over whom death no longer holds sway (Rev 21:3–4). The author of Revelation thus provides an ending to the myth told in Genesis.

Revelation is of course more commonly classified as an apocalypse, which I consider a subcategory of myth.⁷ Collins offers the following definition of the term apocalypse:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.⁸

The contents of the revelation speaking of eschatological salvation and “another supernatural world” are examples of the ahistoricity that I consider characteristic of myths in general. Unlike other kinds of myths, apocalypses as Collins defines them include an account of how the revelation was mediated. This is a trait they have in common with vision reports, a genre discussed later in this paper.

Parables are closely related to myths as I have defined them as they are also clearly fictional while conveying a message that is considered true. Unlike narratives that are usually termed myths, parables are not set outside history but tend to use material from everyday life to illustrate a

⁶ This is how Bauckham 1993, 37 interprets Rev 13:14. See also Yarbrow Collins 1981.

⁷ On the relationship between apocalyptic and myth, see also Collins 1998, 18–19.

⁸ Collins 1998, 5.

point.⁹ In some cases it is difficult to determine whether a narrative is better classified as a parable or a myth. Compare for example the parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) with the narrative about Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16). Both narratives are set outside of history, both have as their context the unequal distribution of blessings, and both have a clear moral teaching, telling of divine punishment for improper behavior. While neither narrative establishes an institution or practice, it is likely that the story of Abel and Cain also served as an origin narrative just like many other narratives commonly considered myths. In this case it might tell of the origin of a nomadic Bedouin tribe (see Gen 4:20).¹⁰ Some other OT texts that have mythical traits have also been labelled parables or myths. These include Jonah and Job, which were surely not intended as historiography, and both of which have been considered lengthy illustrative parables.¹¹ The two narratives could also be characterized as myths; Jonah's book has certainly functioned as such, being a central reading at Yom Kippur, reminding people of God's forgiveness to those who repent.¹²

In popular use the term “myth” often has negative connotations. My aim is not to degrade a narrative by referring to it as a myth or as imaginative literature. Identifying a narrative as the product of the imagination should not be taken to imply that that narrative cannot be divinely inspired. There is no reason to assume that God cannot work through people's imagination as well as through their reason. If God is as Christian theologians have traditionally described him, that is to say prior to and distinct from the world, we would not expect to be able to experience him directly by our senses. Arguably it is through our imagination, in our thoughts and dreams that we would encounter God most directly—but even then our experience would by necessity be mediated by our previous experiences.¹³ In short, to say that a religious text is imaginative literature (or myth, as I use that term) does not imply that it is of less worth or that it cannot convey truth, that is to say, containing information that may be considered trustworthy by the community for whom the text was written,

⁹ Gabel, Wheeler and York 2000, 220.

¹⁰ So Mowinckel, referred to in Westermann 1994, 286. But see Wenham 1987, 108.

¹¹ Cf. Goldingay 1994, 74; Alter 2011, 37 refers to the rabbinic saying, “There was no such creature as Job; he is a parable.”

¹² The Haftarah for the Yom Kippur afternoon service.

¹³ Goldingay 1994, 315 suggests that God can work through a person's imagination: “imagination is the point of contact between divine revelation and human experience.”

for example relating to how God relates to people or to how people ought to live, offering interpretations of past events, or indeed telling them of realities that they cannot empirically verify.¹⁴ If we treat an imaginative narrative as a historical account, however, it becomes less true. Reception history shows that texts that were originally intended as fictional vehicles of a philosophical or theological insight may have come to be misinterpreted as historical accounts. For example, it is unlikely that the first chapters of Genesis were intended as history, but that it how many interpret them. If a skeptic approaches these texts as attempts at writing historical accounts, he would judge them untrue—but he would be guilty of misinterpreting the texts, of misunderstanding the author’s intentions.

My definition of myth as a narrative that is intended as true and authoritative but not as history is similar to the way the term has been traditionally used. James Dunn writes,

‘Myth’ is something other than ‘history’, and is defined in large part by that contrast. Thus the definition of myth depends on the definition of history. And history from its earliest usage (the Greek word, *historia*) has denoted knowledge or information obtained by systematic observation.¹⁵

Along the same lines, Stefan Arvidsson, a Marxist scholar of religion, advocates a return to the Platonic distinction between *mythos* and *logos*,¹⁶ which approximates the colloquial distinction between story and history.¹⁷ In his view an essential difference between the two is that history and science use “source criticism, systematic interviews, extensive fieldwork, experiments, quantitative calculations or other scientific methods,” while

¹⁴ Compare Goldingay 1995, 215: “Scripture is concerned for the factual reality of the realms above and below, ahead and behind, even while it assumes that our apprehension of them is always self-involving rather than ‘objective.’” Even a conservative theologian like Clark Pinnock is willing to grant that there is material in Genesis that may be considered “figurative” rather than literal (Pinnock and Callen 2009, 149). Like many Evangelicals, Pinnock would rather not use the term “mythological,” however (Pinnock and Callen 2009, 155).

¹⁵ Dunn 1992, 566.

¹⁶ “... de religionshistoriska ämnena ... bör bevara och understryka skillnaden mellan myt (*mythos*) och förnuftigt underbyggda historier (*logos*)” (Arvidsson 2007, 58).

¹⁷ Plato is often said to have contrasted myth (μῦθος) with *logos*, but according to Hallowell 2007, 453, “[c]ontrary to what is sometimes claimed, no simple, unqualified *muthos/logos* dichotomy is presupposed in Plato’s work.” Lincoln 1999, 39 points out that Plato considered μῦθοι to be a form of *logos*, albeit a largely false and low-standing one.

“mythical narratives are not based on methodical research,”¹⁸ but are rather products of the imagination. Notably, the author of 2 Peter is of the same opinion; myths are “cleverly devised,” i.e., fabricated, artificial creations (2 Pet 1:16, NRSV).

Among those narratives that the author of 2 Peter would claim are true are narratives that Arvidsson considers myths. This raises the question, how can one determine whether an author intended for his narrative to be seen as true but not as history? It is not equally obvious to all scholars what is clearly imaginative and what is not. Nor is it always obvious whether a clearly imaginative text was intended to be authoritative. Many have noted similarities between texts that have traditionally been labelled myths and fairy tales.¹⁹ Both are clearly imaginative compositions, and the myths of one culture will in another culture, where the main characters are not revered as gods, be treated as fairy tales. Consequently, some scholars consider the presence of gods as characters in the narrative a distinguishing feature of myths.

Narratives about a God or Gods

Some scholars use the term “myth” to refer to all authoritative narratives that have gods as actors. Martin Dibelius, one of the pioneers of New Testament form-criticism, adopted a rather restrictive definition of myth requiring the presence of more than one supernatural personage in the story. In his view, “[t]he only narratives in the Gospels which really describe a mythological event, i.e. a many-sided interaction between mythological but not human persons, are the records of the Baptismal miracle, the Temptation of Jesus, and the Transfiguration.”²⁰ Dibelius’s requirement that a narrative have more than one mythological person to be classified as a myth might seem rather arbitrary; some suspect it was designed only to exclude most Biblical texts from the category, and is just an attempt to immunize the Gospels against comparisons with other religions.²¹ But I do

¹⁸ ”Mytiska berättelser bygger inte på metodiska undersökningar” (Arvidsson 2007, 58).

¹⁹ See de Vries 1954, Eliade 1963, especially the chapter “Myths and Fairy Tales.”

²⁰ Dibelius 1971, 271.

²¹ So Childs 1962, 15–16. Dibelius’s definition goes back to how the brothers Grimm used the term. Some scholars still follow Dibelius’s usage—see discussion in Oden 1992. Compare also the definition put forward by the Swedish scholar of religion Åke Hultkrantz 1984, 155: “The myth is an epic tradition about gods, whose pattern of actions is located in a higher world – usually a distant, prototype-forming primeval age – and whose character of true narrative is taken for granted.”

not think that would be a fair charge. The leading German Egyptologist Jan Assmann suggests that monotheism is so different from polytheistic religions that it was necessary to develop other literary genres instead of myth to present its message in a coherent manner. In his analysis of Egyptian narratives he writes: “There is no myth about a god that does not mention other gods. Myths are the stories in which the gods relate to one another.”²² Assmann follows in the tradition of the Grimms and Dibelius in how he uses the term “myth,” but his distinction between myth and sacred history ought not to be considered all that controversial; narratives about gods interacting in a primordial or celestial realm can hardly be taken as history. One may note the similarities between myths and sacred history without being compelled to fuse the categories. Myths and sacred history may have the same role in religious communities, but as Forsyth puts it, “what distinguishes both Jewish and Christian religious systems ... is that they elevate to the sacred status of myth narratives that are situated in historical time.”²³

New Testament scholar John Riches has a wider definition of myth than Dibelius: “Myths are narratives that tell of the interaction of (a) divine being/s with the world of human beings in such a way as to communicate to those who accept them compelling modes of looking at the world and equally compelling patterns of behaviour.”²⁴ He characterizes the Gospels as “mythical narratives,” and argues that no sharp line should be drawn “between myth and ‘theologically understood history’.” He then proceeds to apply Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation of myth to Gospel material. I do not advocate following Riches’s example. If we define “myth” this broadly, there is no longer any distinction between myths and other religious narratives. The term “myth” thus becomes superfluous at best.²⁵

If the term “myth” is to be used as a formal category, it would seem profitable to distinguish between narratives telling of God acting through historical events and narratives where God is the immediate actor. The former would be an example of sacred history (i.e., interpreted history), the latter would be myth. While the evangelists assume that God can break into history, there are actually very few examples of God directly

²² Assmann 2008, 20.

²³ Forsyth 1987, 9.

²⁴ Riches 2001, 31.

²⁵ I wonder whether Riches classified the Gospel narratives as myth so that he could use Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist method in analyzing them. The structuralist method can be applied not only to myths but to any dualist text or worldview.

intervening in human events in the Gospels. On occasion the Gospels will let humans share the stage with angelic actors, such as in the narratives around the birth of Jesus or at the resurrection.²⁶ Various writers seem to assume another world, where the angels stand before the face of God (e.g., Matt 18:10), but again we find no sustained narratives about that world in the Gospels. In the Gospels Jesus speaks of heaven and hell, but not much is said about what happens there. In John's Gospel Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36)—but aside from Revelation, no attempts are made at describing this other world (except to say that the fire in hell is not quenched—Mark 9:48—and that there is weeping and gnashing of teeth there—Matt 13:42). There are a few other references in the Gospels to what we might call events regarding other heavenly beings; one such is the reference to Satan's fall (Luke 10:18).²⁷ But these references are usually quite short, and more significantly, they are often identified as visions in the text.

The Gospels are comparatively restrained in the role they give God in the narrative. For this reason I consider it misleading to label them myths. One might ask, however, if Jesus is considered to be God by Christians, does that mean that the Gospels are myths, even when the things he is described as doing are very human? Would the same narratives not be myths for those Christians who do not consider the historical Jesus to be God? If we were to make this distinction we would define myth on the basis of the narrative's reception rather than on the basis of purely formal criteria, however. There is of course nothing wrong with defining a text on the basis of how it is used, but that is not my approach in this paper. In some cases it may be hard to separate the human and the divine in the Gospels. This is especially the case in John's Gospel we encounter both the highest Christology, with the pre-existent Word identified as God, but at the same time we also find the most human descriptions of Jesus. Our analytical categories do not perfectly match the texts we study, but I find it more helpful to categorize texts like the Gospel of John as sacred history than as myth.

Defining myths as authoritative narratives that have a god or gods as actors does not seem more elegant than defining myths as narratives that are presented as true and authoritative but not as history. Restricting myths to narratives about a god or gods arbitrarily excludes creation sto-

²⁶ I will return to their classification as I address vision reports below.

²⁷ Cf. Löfstedt 2011.

ries involving animals and culture heroes that are strikingly similar to creation stories telling of gods. The distinction between imaginative and historically based narratives seems more significant than one based on the identity of the main characters in the narrative.

Sacred History

While some historians of religion classify the Gospels as myth, evangelical theologians tend to consider them as a form of history; so too does Assmann. “In the Bible sacred history (*historia sacra*) takes the place of myth (*historia divina*). The biblical God develops and reveals his personal characteristics not in relation to other gods within a framework of mythical constellations – there are no other gods around him – but rather toward mankind.”²⁸ But clearly there are significant differences between the Gospel texts and modern historiography. For Dunn the term “history” denotes “knowledge or information obtained by systematic observation.”²⁹ As was noted, the authors of the Pastoral Epistles and 2 Peter use the term “myth” in a similar manner to Dunn and the Platonic philosophers.³⁰ These New Testament authors maintain that all (other) religions are created by man, and that their holy narratives are “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet 1:16, NRSV).³¹ In contrast, they maintain that what they relate is historical truth, not myth. The author of 2 Peter could argue that the Gospel message is based on extensive fieldwork in the form of participant observation—the apostles worked alongside Jesus for several years; it is based on eye-

²⁸ Assmann 2008, 21 in turn builds on Fishbane’s *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*.

²⁹ Dunn 1992, 566.

³⁰ See 1 Tim 1:3–4 (“I urge you ... to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith” NRSV); 1 Tim 4:7 (“Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales” NRSV); 2 Tim 4:3–4 (“For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but ... will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” NRSV); Tit 1:13–14 (“... rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth” NRSV); 2 Pet 1:16 “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we have been eyewitnesses of his majesty” NRSV).

³¹ Contra Dunn (1979, 288) who claims that what the authors of the Pastorals and 2 Peter reject “is only one *genre* of myth.” Dunn’s definition of myth is anachronistically wide.

witness accounts—not just rumors; it is based on systematic interviews (compare Luke 1:1–4).³²

The author of 2 Peter seems to have correctly interpreted the aims of the evangelists. As Bauckham convincingly argues, the evangelists evidently considered it important to show that their narratives were based on eyewitness accounts.³³ Most New Testament narratives are anchored in time and place. The Gospels are set in the Galilee and Judea under Roman rule in the first half of the first century; Acts describes events that are to have taken place in various locales in the eastern half of the Roman Empire around the middle of the first century.³⁴ Jesus' birth is connected to Emperor Augustus' rule and Quirinius' governorship of Syria (Luke 2:1–2), and the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry is placed “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius” (Luke 3:1, NRSV). Even if some of the historical references seem inaccurate, the evangelists have apparently attempted to write a historical account (cf. Luke 1:4).³⁵ The Gospels largely consist of retellings of comparatively mundane events, such as the many references to Jesus teaching or the detailed accounts of his arrest and crucifixion. To say that the Gospels as a whole are myths gives the uninformed reader an inaccurate understanding of the contents of these texts.

There are nevertheless clear differences between the Gospels and modern academic history. One of the most significant is that the evangelists did not experience the same constraints in what kind of events they report as having occurred. Another related difference is their understanding of what may be considered trustworthy source of information. Both are connected with their conviction that God can work in human events.

Reports of the Miraculous

While the gospels may be considered a form of historical writing judging by their overall structure, individual parts of the gospels may seem rather

³² Justin Martyr referred to the Gospels as “memoirs of the apostles” (*1 Apol.* 67:3) suggesting that he viewed them as accounts based on the testimony of the apostles themselves.

³³ Bauckham 2006. Cf. Luke 1:2, and references to named witnesses of key events in all the Gospels.

³⁴ In contrast, in Christian folk religion narratives originating in the New Testament often lose their historical moorings and take on the form and function of traditional myths, and acquire a timeless feel.

³⁵ Marshall 1978. Hagner 2012, 61: “the Gospels present themselves as historical narratives in story form.”

imaginative to the modern reader. In the view of the German New Testament scholar David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) myths are found throughout the Bible. Even if the authors may have intended to write history, the result was myth, in part because of inadequate source criticism. Strauss considers these accounts fictional, but not necessarily conscious falsifications, although he notes, “It is not ... easy to draw a line of distinction between intentional and unintentional fiction.”³⁶ Strauss explained that myths are accounts that are not historical, and an account is not historical “when the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events.”³⁷ This definition is attractive in its simplicity, but it forces narratives into categories based on criteria foreign to the original authors and audiences and says more about the scholar’s convictions than those of the authors he is seeking to understand.³⁸

When New Testament authors described miracles, they might well have thought these events happened exactly as described and were caused by divine intervention. They were not consciously inventing something, but they accepted as being historical accounts that modern historians would likely reject. The fact that a historian or biographer is not a good source critic does not change the genre of his work. As Halpern argues, if we have good reason to believe that the author’s intention is to write history, that work should be classified as history, even if some may consider it bad history.³⁹

In discussing the classification of accounts of miracles we may draw a parallel to scientific literature. As science advances, the assumptions that older scientific texts are based on prove to no longer be tenable, but that does not mean that those texts should not be considered scientific treatises. Their genre has not changed just because they are no longer considered true. In the same way as outdated scientific treatises should not be considered mythological, Biblical narratives about demon possession should not be judged myths just because scientists today do not recognize the existence of demons. If we let our country’s and our era’s scientific community’s definition of what is natural determine how we define myth, our definition will say little about either the intentions of the original author or of the community that first accorded the text authority. All it tells the reader

³⁶ Strauss 1846, 78.

³⁷ Strauss 1846, 87.

³⁸ This was pointed out by Childs 1962, 14.

³⁹ Halpern 1996, xxiii.

is what worldview we as individual scholars have, and that is not particularly interesting. New Testament accounts of exorcism, although they do reflect a different worldview than the one prominent in the West today, should not be singled out as myths because (among other things) it is in fact not so obvious that they involve what the author would have considered to be supernatural actors. In that culture, as in many cultures today, it was assumed that people could be possessed by various spirits; that is the reason people turned to exorcists for help. Even when the natural sciences developed in early modern Europe, many scholars assumed that accounts of witches and devils were in fact true. They did not consider devils to be supernatural but a part of God's creation (i.e., nature) and they believed that they acted in accordance with laws governing their nature.⁴⁰ After all, in their view only God could break the laws of nature.

The scholars who reject accounts of the miraculous as not being history argue that either the miracles really happened, in which case the narratives are historical accounts, or they did not, in which case they are the author's constructions. And since in their view miracles cannot have happened, reports of miracles must be the constructions of the author.⁴¹ This is a false dichotomy. Rather than classifying texts in light of our own worldview, it seems more reasonable to interpret a text in light of the context in which it was written. Halpern writes regarding the presence of miraculous accounts in historical books of the Old Testament: "It is my position that mythic material embedded in the history is either taken from sources on which the historian relied (because the miraculous was not impossible, in his view) or metaphoric in nature (as it was in origin)."⁴² Contrary to Halpern, I do not agree that so-called mythical material is always metaphorical in origin, but with Halpern I find it likely that the biblical authors believed that the accounts of miracles they incorporated into their narrative were trustworthy.

Accounts of miracles are always interpretations of what happened, as indeed are all historical accounts. But in the case of supposed miracles the

⁴⁰ Clark 1997, 152: "In early modern Europe it was virtually the unanimous opinion of the educated that devils, and, *a fortiori*, witches, not only existed in nature but acted according to its laws."

⁴¹ Cf. Mack 1988, 76: "Mark can be shown to have exaggerated the power of Jesus to cast out demons for his own narrative purposes. Thus the evidence is that miracle stories functioned in some early Jesus movement to enhance its claim to significant social identity by claiming for its founder miraculous powers. They are not historical reports."

⁴² Halpern 1996, xxii.

interpretations differ significantly, the same event witnessed by two people may be interpreted as an act of God by one, but not by the other. This is something the evangelists were aware of. When Jesus asks his heavenly Father to glorify his name, a voice from heaven is heard (John 12:28). Those present are said to have disagreed as to exactly what they heard. Was it the voice of God himself, or the voice of an angel, or was it a roll of thunder (12:28–29)? Similarly, John records that there was disagreement as to whether the man who regained his sight was really born blind (9:8–9, 19).

There are, however, accounts of miraculous events in the Gospels, narratives that tell of things the original audience would have deemed impossible actually happening, such as where Jesus turns water into wine (John 2:1–11) or walks on the water (Matt 14:22–34; Mark 6:47–52; John 6:16–21). These are recorded by the evangelists as things that actually happened, something few modern academicians would do.⁴³ The evangelists apparently believed that these miracles really happened, and they were recorded precisely because they contradict usual natural processes and in the view of the authors they thereby testify to the inbreaking of the divine in human history. Pinnock and Callen write with refreshing honesty,

What makes something seem to be legendary is precisely its abnormality. People do not turn to salt; they do not come out of hot furnaces unburned; they do not live a thousand years. When we read of such things outside the Bible we do not hesitate to regard them as legend, because we prefer to think in terms of ordinary causation rather than special divine action (even though we would not rule that out in principle).⁴⁴

Pinnock and Callen then ask, considering that nothing is impossible for God, “how can we ever know that a given case of the improbable is or is not a legend?” A folklorist would answer that the account of an improbable event set in history may be classified as a legend, but that does not

⁴³ For a notable exception, see Wacker’s history of the early Pentecostal movement (2001, x): “Miracle stories, which play a large role in this book, never appear with qualifying terms like ‘alleged’ or ‘so-called’. That is partly because I try to see the world through my subjects’ eyes, and partly because I remain unsure where their view ends and mine begins.”

⁴⁴ Pinnock and Callen 2009, 155.

have to mean it did not happen.⁴⁵ It remains up to the readers to decide whether they find the report trustworthy.

Bultmann argues that one cannot expect modern Christians to believe in miracle stories because these accounts are based on a mythical worldview to which we no longer subscribe.⁴⁶ He suggests that “the New Testament message ... demands the elimination of myth if it is to be understood as it is meant to be,” and he asserts “If the truth of the New Testament proclamation is to be preserved, the only way is to demythologize it.”⁴⁷ Bultmann’s language is somewhat opaque; who is it that determines how the message was meant to be understood? Whose meaning is it that he speaks of? Is it that of God or of the human authors? How can we determine what the authors’ intentions were, and how do we determine what was intended as myth? I suggested we can determine an author’s intentions in part on the basis of his use of sources, and a case can be made for the Gospels as an attempt at writing history. Bultmann simply assumes—without support—that his understanding of the Gospel texts as not being intended as history is correct. It may be that Bultmann has been blinded by his own apologetic purposes. He wishes to present a Gospel message that is acceptable to modern human beings. As a convinced Christian he knows that the Gospels are true; his task is to explain how this can be in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. While some narratives that seem to us to be more imaginative than historically accurate may have been composed to express a philosophical or theological truth as Bultmann suggests, not all must have this function.

Significantly, compared with later Gospels, the canonical Gospels are actually restrained in the number and kinds of miracles they record.⁴⁸ Hagner suggests, “there are historical controls at work in the canonical Gospels that were not present in the composition of the apocryphal gospels,” that is, the authors of the canonical gospels would not wish to con-

⁴⁵ Compare this to Dégh’s definition of legend: “The legend observed in the field usually entertains an extranormal topic which has three essential qualities. It is of existential importance for people who participate in its presentation, elaboration and discussion, it is surrounded by uncertainty lacking firm knowledge, and it is controversial, invites expression of diverse points of view” (Dégh 1990, 76). Strauss noted already in 1840 that some scholars advocated using the term “legend” (German *Sage*) rather than myth for miraculous narratives in the NT (1846, 41).

⁴⁶ Bultmann 1957, 1–5.

⁴⁷ Bultmann 1957, 10. See Dunn 1979, 298.

⁴⁸ See Evans 1993, 30–33.

tradict the testimony of still living eye-witnesses.⁴⁹ This again suggests that the authors' ambition was to write something that would be viewed as accurately reflecting what happened. For the first generation of readers, it was eyewitnesses rather than the church as an institution that vouched for the trustworthiness of the narratives. Bauckham suggests that the evangelists mention several minor characters by name precisely because they were witnesses to the events described.⁵⁰

Inner Experiences as a Source of Information in the Gospels

There are not many instances in the gospel narratives of God directly intervening in the affairs of human beings. But the gospels do tell of God (or more often angels) speaking or appearing in dreams and visions at certain key points in the narrative. At key moments in the gospels Christ's true nature is revealed through vision reports, not as events that could have been objectively accessible. These visions are treated as reliable sources for knowledge of spiritual reality by the authors. These are the literary forms in the gospels that are closest to myths as I have defined them, and I will therefore look at them in greater detail.

The pioneer form critic Martin Dibelius characterized only three passages in the New Testament as myths.⁵¹ All of these can also be classified as vision reports, that is, narratives that relate what someone claims to have seen or heard in a vision or a dream.⁵² The categories myth and vision report overlap,⁵³ but it is useful to make a distinction between the two. Unlike many myths, vision reports include the explanation that this sequence of events came to the narrator's knowledge through a vision.

⁴⁹ Hagner 2012, 63.

⁵⁰ Bauckham 2006, 39-66.

⁵¹ Cf. Dibelius 1971, 271: "The only narratives in the Gospels which really describe a mythological event, i.e. a many-sided interaction between mythological but not human persons, are the records of the Baptismal miracle, the Temptation of Jesus, and the Transfiguration." Bock (1991, 186) proposes that these texts be called "Direct Supernatural Encounter Stories" instead, to avoid the negative connotations of the term 'myth'.

⁵² Dibelius does not include vision report as a genre in his study of the literary forms of the New Testament. For a stimulating study of vision reports in the New Testament, see Humphrey 2007.

⁵³ The categories vision report, myth and prophecy overlap considerably. The fact that many Australian aboriginal myths are set in dream time suggests that some at least originated as dreams or visions. Similarly, the most 'mythological' of the New Testament texts, Revelation, is set up as a vision report (Rev 1:10-11).

John S. Hanson defines this genre, which he refers to as ‘dream-vision report’, thus:

The fully recounted dream-vision report is a relatively short narrative of a dream or vision which exhibits most or all of a characteristic set of components that include the dreamer, place, time, mental state, dream figure, message and/or scene, reaction and response, along with one or more technical terms. The subject matter of a given dream-vision has great variety, but it is almost always revelatory, containing some type of message or pertinent information related to the dreamer and his circumstances.⁵⁴

As Hanson shows, in Hellenistic and Roman society, it was commonly believed that gods spoke to people through dreams and visions. The same was true of Israelite religion.⁵⁵ It is not surprising that New Testament authors also believed that God could speak through dreams and visions. Most divine–human encounters in the Synoptic Gospels are presented in the context of visions. Examples of vision reports in the Gospels and Acts include: Zechariah’s encounter with the angel of the Lord (Luke 1:8–22); the shepherds’ vision of angels (Luke 2:9–15); angels appearing to Mary from Magdala, Joanna and Mary (Luke 24:4–7, 23); Stephen’s vision of the Son of Man (Acts 7:56); and Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9; 22:6–11; 26:12–18). It is on the basis of vision-reports that theologians have formulated the doctrine of the virgin birth (Matt 1:20–21; Luke 1:26–38)—the virginal conception itself is (of course) not described.⁵⁶ The initial resurrection accounts are also vision reports. They do not portray God actually raising Jesus to life;⁵⁷ instead the writers give other evidence for resurrection such as the empty tomb and visions of angels.

Dibelius considers the account of the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism a myth, but it is presented in John’s Gospel as a vision report given by John the Baptist (John 1:32–34). In Mark (1:10) Jesus is the one who has the vision, and it is him that the heavenly voice addresses, while Matthew (3:17) gives the impression that the heavenly voice identifying Jesus was a public announcement, thereby moving the account from the report of a vision toward legend. As Dibelius suggests, it is tempting to

⁵⁴ Hanson 1980, 1413.

⁵⁵ See the various contributions in Hayes and Tiemeyer 2014.

⁵⁶ As noted by Dibelius 1971, 269.

⁵⁷ Cf. Dibelius 1971, 270: “as is well known, a description of the *Resurrection of Jesus* is lacking in the Gospel texts until the time of the Gospel of Peter.”

imagine that John best preserves the narrative's original form.⁵⁸ As we shall see, there are other instances where it seems a vision report has been reworked into a legend by the evangelists.

Dibelius classified the temptation narrative telling of Jesus' interaction with Satan in the wilderness as a myth. Pinnock and Callen are also willing to grant that this episode "sounds mythical" but they add, confusingly, "it is likely that this is the mode of presentation only," implying that myth is something other than a literary genre.⁵⁹ It has also been considered a midrash on Deuteronomy.⁶⁰ Although this episode is not strictly speaking a vision-report as neither Matthew nor Luke specifies that Jesus encounters the devil in a vision, there are hints in the text that this is how it is to be interpreted. Like mystics in other cultures who seek visions,⁶¹ Jesus fasted for an extended period of time (forty days) before he had this experience. He follows the example of Moses and Elijah; Moses was on the mountain for the same length of time when he received the words of the covenant (Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9), and Elijah encountered the Lord at the mouth of a cave after going without food or water for the same length of time (1 Kgs 19:8).⁶² It is questionable whether the author believed that there really existed such a high mountain that all the kingdoms of the world could be seen from it (Matt 4:8).⁶³ He may rather be relating the experience as he had heard it. Jesus might have told of his battle with temptation as he experienced it; whether he was transported physically or only mentally was immaterial to the temptation. In the same way, Paul writes about someone (it is commonly assumed that he is being autobiographical) who "was caught up to the third heaven – whether in body or not I do not know; God knows" (2 Cor 12:2, NRSV).⁶⁴ While it cannot be proven that the narrative about the temptation in the wilderness originated as a vision report, one may safely say that it is patterned on a vision re-

⁵⁸ Dibelius 1971, 272. Malina (1999, 358) and Pilch (2011, 115) consider Jesus' and/or John's experience at the baptism as examples of ASC (altered/alternate state of consciousness) experiences.

⁵⁹ Pinnock and Callen 2009, 157.

⁶⁰ Gerhardsson 1966.

⁶¹ Compare Ruth Benedict's classic article (Benedict 1922).

⁶² Hagner 1993, 64.

⁶³ Origen cites this as an instance when something was recorded as a historical event, although it "did not literally take place" (*Princ.* 4.1.16, trans. Frederick Crombie.)

⁶⁴ Barrett 1973, 307; Barnett 1997, 562.

port, and I suggest that this is how it was interpreted by the original readers.

The account of the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8 // Matt 17:1–8 // Luke 9:28–36), considered by Dibelius one of the few myths in the Gospels, is explicitly interpreted as a vision (ὄραμα) by Matthew (17:9).⁶⁵ There are hints in the other Synoptic Gospels as well that what is related is to be understood as a vision.⁶⁶ They relate that the three disciples saw something that on any account would be out of the ordinary; two people long since dead interacting with Jesus. No explanation is given as to how the disciples could identify these two men as Moses and Elijah. In dreams you know immediately who is who; the same seems to be the case in visions.⁶⁷ The Gospels also tell of a sudden shift in perception, characteristic of dreams and visions; the unusual sight that the disciples saw was suddenly (ἐξάπινα) no longer to be seen (Mark 9:8). The vision is revelatory; it reveals something about who Jesus really is: he supersedes both Moses and Elijah, and a voice from the cloud identifies him as the Son of God, and says that it is to him the disciples should listen (Matt 17:5). There is then good reason to treat the transfiguration narratives as vision reports, as Edith Humphrey does.⁶⁸

Another narrative that some have considered mythological is the account of Jesus walking on the water. Mark (6:47–52), Matthew (14:22–34) and John (6:16–21) tell about this event, but they tell the story from different points of view. While Mark focuses on what Jesus does, John focuses on what the disciples experienced.⁶⁹ John does not say anything about Jesus' thoughts or motivations. He relates that the disciples "saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified" (6:19, NRSV). John's account allows for the interpretation that the disciples had a vision, similar to the vision of Jesus the disciples had on

⁶⁵ Dibelius 1971, 271.

⁶⁶ Cf. Luke 9:32: "Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep ..." (NRSV). See further Pilch 2011, 124–45: "The Transfiguration of Jesus: An Experience of Alternate Reality." Pilch 2011, 117: "In the Mediterranean world of the present and of antiquity, the solution to concerns and problems often comes in ASC experiences (dreams, trances, visions, and the like). The transfiguration experience does just that." See also Hanson 1980, 1422. Klaus Berger considers these accounts "a union of vision and locution" (2008, 75), originating in a "mystical experience" (2008, 76).

⁶⁷ Regarding Greek and Roman vision reports Hanson (1980, 1410) notes, "The narrative generally makes quite clear who the dream figure is."

⁶⁸ Humphrey 2007, 136–38.

⁶⁹ Also noted by Giblin 1983, 97.

the mountain in the synoptic Gospels. This is one of several occasions in John where Jesus uses the expression ἐγώ εἰμι in reference to himself (6:20). Here (as in the accounts in the other two gospels, Mark 6:50; Matt 14:27) it is used absolutely, without a predicate, making an allusion to the divine name more likely—and suggesting that this narrative may be considered an account of a theophany. Along these lines, Jesus' admonition to his disciples, "Do not be afraid" (John 6:20, NRSV; Mark 6:50) is reminiscent of the words of the angels in the Gospels, and of Jesus' words to his disciples after the transfiguration in Matthew (17:7).⁷⁰ While John's account can be interpreted as a vision on a par with the transfiguration, Mark's does not allow for such an interpretation. Because of its focus on Jesus' action rather than the disciples' experience, Mark's account is more of a miracle-story or legend, albeit one with elements reminiscent of a vision-report. For example, Mark lets in an element of uncertainty in the narrative—the event is said to have taken place at a time of day when it was likely that the disciples were tired, and he reports that the disciples at first think they see a ghost (Mark 6:49; also Matt 14:26). The reference to Jesus' almost walking past them (Mark 6:48) adds an additional dream-like element to the narration.⁷¹ Mark's account may have originally been based on a vision report, but with retelling has approximated the form of legends.

Another important, albeit brief, vision report is the one of Satan's fall, related in Luke 10:18: "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (NRSV). This is one of the few passages in the Gospels that describes the activity of an otherworldly personage, and is close to myth as I have defined that genre. The account is put forward as true and authoritative, but while Luke tells of Jesus' relating his vision as a historical event, Luke does not anchor Satan's fall itself in history; not surprisingly, interpreters differ widely in when they place the fall.⁷² This vision report may have inspired the account of Satan's fall in Rev 12,⁷³ which as it forms a complete narrative may be considered a myth.

⁷⁰ Malina (1999, 359) writes regarding this passage in the three gospels "they experienced an ASC of a waking vision."

⁷¹ Others have compared this event to "a theophanic passing by" (Gundry 1993, 340); cf. Exod 33:23.

⁷² Cf. Löfstedt 2011.

⁷³ Cf. Humphrey 2007, 112.

Of these visions the most central for the Christian faith are those connected with Christ's resurrection.⁷⁴ The earliest account is recorded in 1 Cor 15:5, where Paul writes that Christ "appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve ..." (NRSV), and could be interpreted as a report of visions. The gospels show a mixture of vision reports and legend-like narratives about Christ's physical presence.⁷⁵ Mark's account ends with the women having a vision of an angel telling them that Jesus had been raised from the dead (16:6); if Mark wrote about an encounter with the risen Christ, as seems likely in light of the promises made in Mark 14:28 and 16:7, that part of the story has been lost.⁷⁶ Matthew's account of the resurrection begins like Mark's with an angel appearing to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matt 28:2–7). Luke's account speaks of women seeing two angelic messengers who inform them that Christ has been raised from the dead (Luke 24:4–7). Christ himself "appears" to Simon (Luke 24:34) and to the disciples on the road to Emmaus—when they recognize him, he disappears (Luke 24:31). In John's account, Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there—but Jesus forbids her from taking hold of him before he has gone to the Father (20:17), suggesting he was not corporeally present. Thus, in all four gospels the resurrection narratives begin with vision reports. But these initial visionary encounters are followed with encounters of a palpably present Jesus in Matthew (28:9), Luke (24:39) and John (20:27)—although in the case of Thomas' encounter with Jesus, John does not specify whether Thomas did in fact touch Jesus. Notably these three gospels mention that the veracity of the original vision reports is questioned: the report of the women who first witnessed the empty tomb and encountered two angelic witnesses was initially rejected as an idle tale according to Luke (24:11); Thomas initially questioned the accuracy of the disciples' report (John 20:25), and the whole account of the resurrection was denied by the chief priests according to Matthew (28:11–15).

⁷⁴ See further Berger 2003, 101; Pilch 2011, 146–62: "Appearances of the Risen Jesus in Cultural Context: Experiences of Alternate Reality." Cf. Hanson 1980, 1422. Theissen 1999, 41: "the Easter appearances [...] are well attested as visionary experiences. There should be no doubt about their content as authentic subjective experience, regardless of how this experience is interpreted."

⁷⁵ Karl Barth, following Martin Kähler, rightly noted that "the resurrection was not a public event, open to anyone regardless of faith" (Dorrien 1998, 149).

⁷⁶ Mark 16:7 suggests that the original account told of a vision of Christ: the young man at the tomb tells the women, "he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (NRSV).

One senses that in the opinion of the evangelists a simple vision is not enough to establish the truth of this key event. While the encounters with angels at Jesus' grave may be classified as vision reports (at least in Mark, Luke and John), it is more difficult to determine how the encounters with the risen Christ should be classified, as the gospels emphasize his physical presence.⁷⁷ Since the reports of these encounters are set within history, I would classify these accounts as legends, bearing in mind that legends are not necessarily untrue, merely that their truth claims are controversial.⁷⁸

Unlike modern academicians, the evangelists include vision reports as part of their historical account. These vision reports are used to convey a view of reality or an interpretation of reality, unlike that obtained in normal circumstances. They are interpreted as divine revelations of a reality that would otherwise have been unknown (e.g., Luke 10:21). In the worldview of the evangelists visions may be authoritative disclosures of a divine truth.⁷⁹ They are presented as conveying or even being messages from God.⁸⁰ The information given in the visions is not originally public knowledge or objectively accessible facts; quite the contrary. Visions are usually given to individuals, not groups of people; the classic example is Paul's visionary experience on the road to Damascus—he is the only one in his entourage who sees the divine light (Acts 9:7). Similarly, it was Christ alone who saw Satan fall from heaven (Luke 10:18). John tells of an occasion where some people hear the voice of an angel, while others hear only thunder (12:28–29). But for the authors of the New Testament this was not a problem. Information that was held to have been divinely transmitted was granted higher status by believers than that which was obtained by purely human means, and the fact that others questioned the

⁷⁷ While I maintain that the Gospel include both vision-reports and legend-like narratives, Pilch tries to sum up all the narratives about encounters with the risen Christ as ASC experiences, and he confusingly asserts that “the risen Jesus from alternate reality could eat broiled fish in material reality” (2011, 120).

⁷⁸ Dégh 1990, 76. Strauss noted already in 1840 that some scholars advocated using the term “legend” (German *Sage*) rather than “myth” for miraculous narratives in the New Testament (1846, 41).

⁷⁹ Cf. Hagner 1995, 498, concerning Matt 17:9: “Matthew uses ὄραμα, regarding it as suitable for a theophany. The word here means a supernatural ‘vision’, not in the sense of something imagined but in the sense of something seen.”

⁸⁰ Cf. Paul's vision of the Macedonian man (Acts 16:9), or Peter's vision of the sheet (Acts 10:9–16).

validity of this knowledge did not make it less valid (cf. 1 Cor 2:7–14).⁸¹ In short, the visions recorded in the gospels are presented as true and authoritative. Being visions, they are also the product of the imagination (even if divinely inspired), and when complex enough to be considered narratives, could be classified as myths following my definition. Because the terms “vision” and “vision report” are more exact than “myth,” they will, however, often prove more useful as analytical terms.

Conclusion

The term “myth” has been used in various ways by students of religion, causing confusion rather than clarity. In this article I have argued for a formal definition of “myth” similar to that used by many folklorists, namely as a narrative that is intended as true and authoritative but not as history. These narratives are imaginative, telling of events set outside of history, e.g., in primeval time or at the end of time, or telling of a god or gods as actors. They are nevertheless held to be true by religious communities that considered them the product of divine revelation. I have explained why following this definition it is misleading to use the term “myth” to characterize the gospels, and why it better suits Revelation. I note the central differences between the genre to which the gospels belong (sacred history) and modern academic history, where the former assumes that God may act through historical events. I explain that since accounts of miracles in the gospels are presented as historical events they should not be classified as myths, but may in some cases be classified as legends. The closest things to myths in the gospel texts are vision reports. The reports themselves are generically closer to legends, while the visions they relate may be considered myths, albeit in abbreviated form.

⁸¹ The evangelists probably applied some form of source criticism to reports of visions. Various authors in the Old and New Testaments allow for the fact that not all visions are true, and warn readers about lying visions. Paul warns that not all visions of angels are from God (2 Cor 11:14; Gal 1:8) and warns against an overdone interest in visions: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking ...” (Col 2:18, NRSV). According to 2 Chron 18:22 God may even send a lying spirits to prophets. See Jer 23:25–32 and also Wis 17:15.

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