

# ADDENDA

## EXCURSUS: THE "MYTH" AND THE "MYTHOS"

by C.C.C.

We certainly need here to look at a word, the careless and uncritical use of which has caused untold confusion in the area of Biblical interpretation—the word "myth." This is one of the most ambiguous words in the English language. What does it mean? It has come to mean just about all things to all men, but with certitude for none. (1) According to the dictionary definition, the function of a myth is to account for the origin of natural phenomena (including especially the astronomical), of ethnic groups, and of social institutions; hence, myths are usually classified as cosmogonic, ethnogonic, and sociogonic, respectively. Astronomical (celestial) myths are generally solar, lunar, or meteorological. (2) In common parlance myths are generally looked upon as purely imaginary fabrications, that is, *sheer fictions*. (3) By many persons the myth is regarded as a literal device which embraces practically all forms of symbolism. Under such a view, however, the fact is often overlooked, that a symbol, in order to be a symbol, has to be a symbol of *something*; that is, it must point to a referent that has some measure of real existence. Hence, if a symbol is in some sense a myth, the myth cannot be a sheer fiction.

(4) It is my conviction that the term "myth" is not legitimately usable in the sense of a sheer fiction; that confusion is to be avoided only if the word is used to designate the *personifications* both explicit and implicit in the ancient pagan polytheisms. These certainly were, in every legitimate sense of

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the term, mythological systems. Much of this pagan mythology, it will be recalled, centered around ideas of the "Sun-father" and the "Earth-mother" (*Terra Mater*). Dr. Yehezkel Kaufmann, for example, lists the chief characteristics of the gods of the ancient polytheisms as follows: (a) They are subject, in the last analysis, to a primordial realm or fate which allocates, both to the gods and to men, their respective "portions" in life. (The Greek word *moira*, "portion," had this exclusive meaning, and is found throughout all Greek literature.) (b) They are personifications of "seminal" forces of this primordial realm in which there are manifold powers or "seeds," such as water, sky, light, darkness, life, death, etc. (They are sometimes personifications of virtues and vices, as Athena, for example, was the goddess of wisdom.) (c) their genealogy occurs through what men would call natural processes (cf. the *Theogony* of Hesiod, a Greek poet of the 8th century B.C.); hence subject to prowers and differences of sex. Pagan mythologies abounded with goddesses as well as gods. (d) They are wholly anthropomorphic, subject to all temptations and passions to which men are subject (only more so *because they are of the divine order* rather than of the human); hence, as stated heretofore, they are guilty of every crime in the category—incest (Zeus' consort was Hera, his sister-wife; in Rome, they were Jupiter and Juno), rape, murder, deceit, treachery, torture, kidnaping, and indeed what not? As a matter of fact, these ancient systems simply reeked with all forms of phallic worship, ritual prostitution, and like perversions. After calling attention to the chief features of these pagan "religions," Dr. Kaufmann contrasts the God of the Bible as follows:

The basic idea of Israelite religion is that God is supreme over all. There is no realm above him or beside him to limit his absolute sovereignty. He is utterly distinct from, and other than, the world; he is subject to no laws, no compulsions, or powers that transcend him. He is, in short, non-mythological. This is the essence of Israelite religion, and that which sets it apart from all forms of paganism.

He then goes on to say, with respect to the store of Old Testament narratives, that these narratives

lack the fundamental myth of paganism: the theogony. All theogonic motifs are similarly absent. Israel's God has no pedigree, fathers no generations; he neither inherits nor bequeaths his authority. He does not die and is not resurrected. He has no sexual qualities or desires and shows no need of, or dependence upon, powers outside himself.<sup>1</sup>

(Parenthetically, and regrettably, it is apparent that the statement above, "He does not die and is not resurrected," is a reflection of the typically Jewish rejection of the death and resurrection of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Cf. Jn. 1:11—"He came unto his own, and . . . his own received him not.")

Is it not significant that the Hebrew language provided no specific word for *goddess*? The word translated "goddess" in 1 Kings 11:5, 33 ("Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians") is the Hebrew *elohim*. These are the only two instances of the use of this Hebrew word in the Old Testament to indicate pagan divinities, a fact which certainly points up the certainty that the Hebrew tongue lacked any such word. (Cf. also the plural form, "the Ashtaroth," Jdg. 2, 13; 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:3, 4. See also under Asherah in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*.) The Hebrew name Ashtoreth, the Phoenician Astarte, the Anatolian Cybele, the Babylonian Ishtar, the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, the Roman Venus, the Teutonic Oestra, the Anglo-Saxon Eastre (whence our word "Easter"), etc., obviously are various ethnic designations for the "Earth Mother" (*Terra Mater*), the worship of whom was the heart and core of the Cult of Fertility which dominated all ancient pagan "religion." Throughout the history of Israel of old, this was the Cult against which their spiritual leaders had to struggle constantly (e.g., the prophet Elijah's conflict with Jezebel). In many instances these female designations became titles, as in the case of the male Baalim. It is astounding that in the midst of all this idolatry which surrounded the Hebrew people, no specific word for *goddess* ever made its way into their language!

1. *Op. cit.*, 60, 61.

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The whole issue here may be summed up, I think, in one transcendent distinction, namely, the God of the Bible is pure *personality* (Exo. 3:13-15), whereas the gods of the pagan mythologies were *personifications*. In his comprehensive treatment of this subject, Dr. Kaufmann is emphasizing the obvious, namely, that mythology, in the legitimate sense of the term, is conspicuously absent from the Old Testament Scriptures. (And to this, I might add, conspicuously absent from the New Testament writings as well.)

However, we are all aware of the experience of "thoughts that lie too deep for words," of ideas which the vocabulary of man is inadequate to communicate. (Indeed, in ordinary life, there are words, especially those which name qualities, which defy definition, except perhaps in terms of their opposites. For example, how can I describe "red" or "redness" in such language that others can know they are seeing what I see? The fact is that I cannot describe redness—I experience it. Of course, the definition could be provided by physics in terms of vibrations, refractions, frequencies, quanta, etc. But about the only way one could define "sour" is by saying it is the opposite of "sweet," or define "hot" by saying that it is the opposite of "cold," etc. Such is the woeful deficiency of human language (Isa. 64:4, 1 Cor. 2:9-10). Why, then, should we be surprised that the Spirit of God should have had to resort to something more than propositional language to reveal God's thoughts and purposes to man? We read in Rom. 8:26-27, that oftentimes in prayer it becomes necessary for the Holy Spirit to take the "unutterable longings" of the soul of the saint whom He indwells (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19) and bear them up to the Throne of Grace "with groanings which cannot be uttered." Need we be surprised, then, that the Spirit should have resorted to the richness of *poetic imagery* at times in order to communicate the ineffable; paradoxically, to describe the indescribable? I might add here that this is precisely what Plato meant by the *mythos*: in his thinking the *mythos* was the "likely story" designed to be *instructive*; the use of poetic imagery to communicate truth so profound that it cannot be communicated in any other way. We do have just such instances of poetic imagery in the Bible (although this figurative device must not be confused with *apocalyptic symbolism*: they are similar in some respects, but not identical). The sooner

we abandon the use of the word "myth" in Biblical interpretation, the sooner will confusion in this area of human thinking be dissipated. We shall call attention to instances of this type of poetic imagery as we proceed with the study of the text of Genesis.

The following comment by Dr. John Baillie about the Platonic *myth* sets forth clearly, it seems to me, the function of poetic imagery in Scripture:

When Plato warns us that we must be content with a "myth," he is very far from meaning that *any* myth will do, or that one myth is as good as another. No, all readers of the *Republic* know that Plato entertained the very strongest opinions about the misleading tendency of some of the old myths and that he chose his own with greatest care. If we tell a myth, he would say, it must be "a likely story (*eikota mython*)"—a myth that suggests the right meaning and contains the right moral values. The foundation of myth and apocalypse, then, can only be the possession of some measure, however small, of true knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

However, I am inclined to repeat, for the sake of emphasis that the ambiguity of the word "myth," as it is currently used, makes it quite unsuitable for use in the interpretation of Scripture.

1. Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting*, 243.