Article

Theorizing Myth to Facilitate Comparison and Re-Description in Biblical Studies

Debra Scoggins Ballentine

Department of Religion, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8554, USA; debra.ballentine@rutgers.edu

Abstract: This article promotes the theorizing of myth in ways that facilitate comparison and re-description of data within Biblical Studies. After addressing background categorical issues within Religious Studies and Biblical Studies, I chart the old model of contrasting Bible as *Truth* with *myth*, including Eusebius's antique articulation as well as Romantic notions of *myth*. Challenging outmoded theories, I identify scholarship that works towards rectification of the category myth, with the aim of bolstering scholarly conversations beyond disciplinary boundaries. Finally, the article suggests rectification of multiple Biblical Studies categories related to myth.

1. Introduction: Categorical Issues within Religious Studies and Biblical Studies

Myth-making is a topic of interest across many scholarly fields of study within the Humanities and Social Sciences, including Classics, Religious Studies, Ancient Studies, Comparative Literature, Anthropology, History, and Sociology. In this article, I identify how the history of biblical scholarship has impacted the topic of myth, and I promote the work of scholars currently engaged with theorizing myth, critical comparative studies, redescription of our data, and rectification of the category myth. The area of Hebrew Bible studies is itself inherently interdisciplinary, and specialists of Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite and Judean religions may research and teach within a variety of university departments, perhaps most often within a department of Religious Studies. Regardless of subdiscipline, within Religious Studies programs, we are familiar with the dominance of particularly 'Western' or European-Christian-centric approaches and assumptions throughout the history of Religious Studies (J. Z. Smith 2009; Sharpe 2014). As we teach our graduate students about this history of the field, current standards include avoiding use of theories, methods, explanations, and terminology that would hold up 'religion' or the 'religious' as sui generis or as a distinct realm of human experience, such as Rudolf Otto's phenomenological model, which has been highly influential.[1]

Within Biblical Studies, we have a microcosm of this slippery methodological slope: terms and concepts derived from Bible-centered studies are reproduced as if they are scholarly second-order categories, and Bible-based concepts are utilized as if they are normative models for all religions. Examples range across concepts such as prayer, sacrifice, monotheism, characterizations of the divine, roles of women, goddesses, 'holy war' and religious violence, notions of the foreign, purity, and many others. One goal of my own research is to encourage scholars to use categories that are cross-disciplinary and to participate in interdisciplinary conversations. The study of Israelite and Judean, as well as early Christian, traditions is better served by using cross-disciplinary categories and methodologies than by requiring distinct types of analysis and distinct categorical constructs.

Another irony is that outdated scholarly models for 'normative' religion were based on selective 'Western', European Christian notions. Therefore, seemingly 'Bible-based' models for religion do not accurately describe ancient Israelite and Judean cultus or early Jewish

and early Christian religions. In other words, historical 'biblical religions' are not accurately represented with outdated, purported 'Bible-based' scholarly models. We continually aim to correct for outmoded myopic paradigms within our disciplines. At the same time, we can make additional efforts to disseminate such correctives throughout related disciplines in which the outdated models have had impact.

That is, during the many decades when biblical scholars posited biblical literature and religions as 'unique', sui generis, and requiring distinct methodologies, our colleagues across the Humanities were listening. There is an interesting scholarly history of studying the works of Homer in conjunction with the Bible, typically under a rubric such as the 'secular' and 'sacred' (Von Hendy 2002, p. 16).[2] As a scholar of Classics, Page duBois eloquently and pointedly discusses that there have been reverberating consequences: "The dominant religions of 'the West' misrecognize their relationship to polytheism and posit an 'original' monotheism that distinguishes them as morally and ethical [sic] superior to other peoples of this earth" (duBois 2014, p. 4). Further, duBois says, "My point here is not to defend polytheism, but to show how difficult it is to discuss it responsibly when it is treated as a curiosity or primitive residue, in the 'routine', the unexamined assumption that monotheism is a superior development out of polytheism. The rigidity of this claim may speak to the monotheisms' defensiveness concerning their own legacies, and even practices, of polytheism" (duBois 2014, p. 2). duBois's insights are apt and certainly align with critical observations among biblical scholars around these topics, as she cites with appreciation throughout her discussion of biblical traditions (duBois 2014, pp. 86–128). I find her work helpful for bolstering my position that as we correct for outmoded theories and reconstructions within our own scholarship, we also have the opportunity and responsibility to impact how biblical literature and related religions are discussed with our colleagues.

In line with this connection that I foster with duBois, John Heath's recent work also attests to the shared interest among Classicists to engage in such interdisciplinary studies in order to move beyond scholarly models that present hurdles to interdisciplinary comparison and conversation (Heath 2020). Heath makes fruitful comparisons among characterizations of gods, especially Homeric gods and Yahweh. His study importantly exhibits the benefits of jettisoning old categorical distinctions such as 'Bible versus myth', and he helpfully traces the history and unfortunate lasting impacts of confessional biases that have run counter to critical comparative analysis (Heath 2020, pp. 39–45). In addition to highlighting scholarship that shares interest in working to lower the barriers for crossing disciplinary boundaries in comparative work, such as that of duBois and Heath, we may also appreciate that additional opportunities for interdisciplinary conversation arise through cross-disciplinary activities within our university communities,[3] participation in conferences outside of our subfields, and aims to publish in arenas that reach a wider disciplinary audience, such as the present context of *Religions*.[4]

2. Theorizing Myth: Old Models

Among scholars who specialize in study of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, we find a variety of attitudes about the category *myth*: for some the whole Bible is myth; for others the Bible contains some myth; for yet others the Bible is *Truth* and *History*, distinctly opposed to and superior to myth (Garbini 2003). How is it that the same anthology of texts has been categorized in such differing ways relative to the category *myth*?

The answer to this question involves the history of scholarship on biblical literature, especially the comparison of *biblical* data to the data from *neighboring* ancient societies. Generally speaking, it has tended to be that scholars who wish to emphasize continuities among biblical and non-biblical ancient literatures are more comfortable using the category *myth* to analyze biblical texts, whereas those who wish to portray biblical literature as distinct, even 'unique', or superior among ancient literatures, tend to reserve *myth* for the 'inferior' literature produced by the neighbors of the ancient Judeans who produced the Hebrew Bible, including Mesopotamian and West Semitic literatures, and the neighbors of

the Judeans who produced the New Testament in the Mediterranean milieu (see discussion below for citations of specific scholars who also discuss this introductory generalization, as well as their critiques of specific scholarship that exhibits these tendencies). This tendency and the like are evident when we see constellations of opposing or seemingly dichotomous notions that constitute what I call "Old Models: The Bible as Theological Truth and Accurate History as Opposed to Non-biblical *Myth*" (see Table 1).

Table 1. Old Models: The Bible as Theological Truth and Accurate History as Opposed to Non-biblical *Myth*.

Biblical	Non-Biblical
Us	Them
Monotheistic	Polytheistic
Theological "sophisticated"	Theological less "evolved"
Spiritual	"Bodily"
"Morally superior"	"Depraved"
"Pious"	"Heathen", "pagan"
Canonized texts record *history*	Others' texts are *myth*
Scripture contains *Truth*[5]	*Myths* as *false* stories

These are all reductive, poorly conceived oppositions and false dichotomies. These are not accurate nor objective characterizations of the primary data and those who produced our data. Some of these notions are based upon interested claims made within primary texts. Claims about Israelite and Judean self-understanding and group boundaries have sometimes been uncritically reproduced in scholarly works. Some of these notions are simply anachronistic to the ancient milieu, and reflect scholarly identification with biblical identities, retrojecting modern religious or confessional biases. These notions of myth intertwined with the language of privileging Yahwistic data hearkens back to Hermann Gunkel (Gunkel 1895; Lundström 2013; Ballentine 2015, pp. 8–9). Of course, scholars who consider biblical literature 'unique' among ancient literatures do not wholly ignore similarities. Likewise, scholars who emphasize continuities would never claim that ancient Judeans had no distinctive social customs and theological notions. Rather, scholars with diverging aims analyze the shared phenomena and distinctions in differing manners. Some wish to make qualitative evaluations that privilege biblical literature over non-biblical literature, an approach often aligned with apologetic and confessional interests. A more critical approach would agree that ancient Judean society, literature, and cultus was distinct, but maintain that the cultural products of any ancient society exhibit both distinctive and innovative features as well as features shared within their milieu. More simply put, biblical tradition is distinctive, but not in any way that might be essentially impossible or even unlikely among the cultural products of ancient neighbors.[6] As Bruce Lincoln succinctly states, "the same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse" (Lincoln 1996, p. 225). I apply this methodological position within Biblical Studies as: the same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any ancient literature ought to be posed of biblical literature.

2.1. Eusebius, Myth, and Others

We learn a great deal by inquiring into the ways that modern apologetic approaches exhibit a continuation following from antique traditions of evaluating biblical tradition as *Truth* and non-biblical traditions as 'false' and derivative. We see this plainly in Eusebius, for example, in his *Praeparatio evangelica*. He exhibits the notion that biblical tradition, for him specifically Christian tradition as developed from Judean 'Hebrew' tradition, has been *True* since the time of creation. He contrasts this with mythologies among Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans as being based on naive and misinformed stories about the sun, moon, stars, and various celestial phenomena as gods. For Eusebius, the point of

recording, preserving, and comparing these 'false' mythologies was to exhibit the 'truth' of biblical tradition and, by extension, his understanding of Christianity as the *True* religion possessing *True* knowledge of the legitimate God. Eusebius uses the label *tēs polutheou planēs* (της πολυθεου πλάνης) to evaluate beliefs and practices that he rejects and that he wishes to contrast with his version of Christianity. The 1903 E. H. Gifford translation (a conveniently available rendition) renders the label as 'polytheistic error' (Gifford 1903). Among a handful of passages that provide such examples, Eusebius asserts that there are certain negative implications that result from 'polytheistic error'. He asserts that *daimones,* whom humans honored as gods, caused groups of peoples to fight with one another and that such divine beings are actually 'demons' (*Praep. ev.* 1.4). He also associates 'polytheistic error' with impiety, denial of God, an abyss of evil, and delusional teachings (*Praep. ev.* 1.6). He traces 'polytheistic error' as being derived from the influence of Egyptian and Phoenician theologies on Greek theologies (*Praep. ev.* 1.8; 1.9). He uses Deut 4:19 as a proof text to support his assertions that while some regarded the sun, moon, and stars as gods, the ancient Hebrews knew better and possessed 'true piety'. He states: "Now also, according to us, this is what the holy writings teach, containing that it was indeed to all the nations that the primary reverence for the visible lights was apportioned. Thus, to only the Hebrew heritage was imparted the initiation of the contemplation of God, the maker and also producer of all things, and of true honoring for him" (*Praep. ev.* 1.9, my translation)[7]. In these sentences, Eusebius alludes to Deut 4:19, which follows a list of orders that the people are to do such-and-such various activities to guard against honoring celestial entities: "...so that you would not lift up your eyes towards the heavens and if you should see the sun, the moon, and the stars, the whole host of the heavens, then you would be driven to honor them and serve them, those which Yahweh your God allotted for all the peoples under the whole heavens" (Deut 4:19, my translation). He opposes the Phoenician and Egyptian erroneous theologies that influenced Greek theology with the 'original and true' theology of the Hebrews (πρώτων καἴ αληθώς Εβραίων), the predecessors to his contemporary *Ioudaioi*, who had the proper sense of God (*Praep. ev.* 1.6). He explicitly equates 'polytheistic error' to 'mythic error' (μυθικωτεραν πλάνην) (*Praep. ev.* 1.6). With both phrases, regarding the 'errors' that he describes and categorizes as 'polytheistic' and 'mythic' or 'myth-based', these terms are adjectival. It is interesting to notice that the lexeme 'polytheistic' is not occurring here as an abstract nor substantive noun, because translations and discussion that utilize the nominal rendering implicitly generate the category of polytheism. He directly contrasts 'true piety' άληθους ευσέβειας with 'chatter/babble' φλυαρία and 'distant/strange mythologies' έκτοποι μυθολογίαι (*Praep. ev.* 1.9).

Antique traditions, such as Eusebius's presentation, evaluate biblical tradition as *Truth* and non-biblical traditions as 'false' and derivative. When we parse the antique apologetic schemata, we can also identify how modern apologetic approaches exhibit a continuation from these, and we may inquire into what we can learn from both the antique and modern data sets. Engaging with the work of Bruno Latour, Daniel Ullucci carefully parses our tendencies to slip into an "insufficient redescription" that echoes the positions within our data, particularly when we ascribe perspectives exhibited within the data to social groups (Ullucci 2019, p. 4; Latour 2005). Ullucci elucidates the relationships we reconstruct between ideology and social formation by developing J. Z. Smith's concept of redescription, particularly how we imagine societal groups as representing competing "sides" (Ullucci 2019, p. 10). I would extend Ullucci's insights to support my observation that unreflective use of myth as a category often goes hand-in-hand with insufficient redescription and portrayal of others and others' cultic and social norms. The ideological aspects within the primary data do not imply that the various 'others' within or around the texts or art are portrayed accurately or that they even existed as such (Ballentine 2019; Rainey 2018). These methodological governors, to use a mechanical metaphor, are helpful with data such as the example of Eusebius as well as the broad range of data within the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and antique interpretations thereof.

Lincoln pointedly articulates the sort of concern I am suggesting: "At times, the distinctions among myth, scholarship, and ideology become seriously blurred, as in the master narrative of European racism, which made categories of nineteenth century research into language and myth the basis for a pointed contrast of 'Aryan' and 'Semite', and narrated their largely imaginary conflict from primordial beginnings to the all-too-real attempts at a 'final solution'" (Lincoln 1998, p. 55). This speaks to the import of continually reevaluating how we utilize categories. I agree with Lincoln's assessment of how authors, interpreters, and story-tellers sometimes utilize "highly selective readings" along with "ingeniously strained hermeneutics" to frame their positions as "moral and holy" (Lincoln 1998, p. 66).[8]

2.2. Romantic Myth

In addition to tracing how modern apologetic interpretations mirror antique evaluations of 'biblical truth' as superior to the stories of others, there has been substantial work done on the Romantic context of the generation of myth as a category. Andrew Von Hendy produced a thorough analysis of the development of myth as a Romantic and modern category, and the breadth of his study is remarkably helpful for further situating the way that the category of myth has been shaped within biblical scholarship. Von Hendy's ambition is "to show that the broadest distinguishable significations of 'myth', the types of theories that I call the ideological, the folkloristic, and the constitutive, all stem from and stand in relation to a fourth, a romantic or transcendental original" (Von Hendy 2002, pp. xi, 49). As Von Hendy shows in intricate detail, modern conceptions of myth have blendings of Enlightenment, romantic, psychological, and anthropological frameworks (Von Hendy 2002, p. 77).

The romantic interpretation of myth has been especially influential and is often taken for granted in popular and scholarly discussion of myth (Von Hendy 2002, p. 42). This includes influences of Rudolf Otto and Jungian archetypal homogenization of myth-types, especially popularized by Mircea Eliade (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 180–81, 187). Authors such as Eliade, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell influenced popular audiences regarding the accessibility of myth and facilitating use of myth for a commonly available "spiritual guidance" (Von Hendy 2002, p. 198). Romantic and neo-Romantic interpretations emphasize the role of feelings and intuition, positing an emotional expressiveness as characteristic of 'mythical thought' (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 154, 156). For example, Cassirer's descriptions of myth associate it with feelings and intuition, as contrasted with associating science with analytical thinking and history with interpretation of the past (Von Hendy 2002, p. 156). Lévy-Bruhl described this as "mythopoeic" thought in his essentializing interpretation of myth-making peoples (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 1925; see critiques in Von Hendy 2002, pp. 100, 105; Ballentine 2015, p. 19). Intuition, feelings, and emotions are fundamentally phenomenological notions, and I agree with Von Hendy's critique of phenomenological approaches (Von Hendy 2002, p. 179). Von Hendy concisely critiques Eliade's approach as "tautegorical", referring to the sense that one can only understand the "sacred" "from within its own realm of experience" (Von Hendy 2002, p. 182). From my perspective, we can study how people describe their experiences as such, with the understanding that people's descriptions are impacted by culturally constructed and socially contingent notions and vocabularies. As the breadth of myth studies across various scholarly disciplines exhibits, there is room for multiple approaches to myth, and distinct approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Taking into account Von Hendy's diachronic analysis of romantic and ideological interpretations of myth, I propose that ideological interpretations continue to warrant attention in light of the dominance of romantic approaches (Lincoln 1999).

I consider it important to contextualize the work of biblical scholarship on myth within Von Hendy's broader, extensive analysis of the loci and interpretations of myth. In line with the dichotomous associations that I chart above (see Table 1), Von Hendy comments that: "One handy way to suggest what might be lost is to note how frequently from the time of its invention onward 'myth' is consistently linked in different disciplinary

approaches with a second concept, in the verbal formula 'myth and x'. Literature presents us with 'myth and symbol', folklore with 'myth and tale', theology with 'myth and religion', anthropology with 'myth and ritual', philosophy (in the twentieth century) with 'myth and fiction.' The persistence of such yokings suggests that protean 'myth' has often been felt to be best pinned in place by differentiation from a diacritical partner" (Von Hendy 2002, p. xvi). Von Hendy draws out assumptions that remain apt regarding misplaced use of theories of human evolution for explaining myth by appeal to biological notions (Von Hendy 2002, p. 268). The way that scholars describe and categorize stories as myth, legend, tale, and so forth sometimes implies qualitative and hierarchical connotations of "development" and "progress" or "degeneration" (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 84, 218). He traces theories of myth, fable, religion, and related notions and categories, as they relate to attempts to parse out differences and relationships among versions of Christianity as the "one true religion" and other traditions, including "proponents of an original monotheism"; such an "original monotheism" was characterized as rational, in contrast to the "vulgar", entertaining, exoteric, polytheistic tales that degenerated from a "primordial monotheism" (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 6–7). Von Hendy clarifies how models that propose various stages of polytheism that "give way" to monotheism are teleological, and the "theology" associated with monotheism is framed as progress over "mythology" (Von Hendy 2002, p. 84). I fully agree with Von Hendy that teleological interpretations of myth are problematic for many reasons (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 41, 120). He discusses "unexamined assumptions" within modern euhemerism of a "theogonic principle" within humans, which he identifies as a "religious subtext" (Von Hendy 2002, p. 8). Intellectualist approaches, in the vein of Edward B. Tylor, and psychologizing approaches, inspired by Freud and Jung, both contributed towards the homogenizing notion of 'natural religion' (Von Hendy 2002, pp. 132, 179; J. Z. Smith 2009, pp. 41–42; Sharpe 2014, pp. 7–9). I agree that there is a teleological, essentialist, and deterministic aspect in these attitudes towards explaining myth (Ballentine 2015, p. 200 n.7).

As Von Hendy explains, modernist authors and critics engaged with the category of myth as they also composed literature utilizing ancient myth and their impressions of it. In doing so, they fundamentally impacted the interpretations of the ancient literature and stories (Von Hendy 2002, p. 149). I identify similar dynamics for biblical materials vis-à-vis theologically minded engagement with the ancient materials. As ancient stories (biblical and otherwise) are adapted throughout their history of interpretation, for many readers and hearers of a story, the adaptation seems to change what a story from and of the past means. This interpretive dynamic is part of why myths and ancient stories maintain lasting appeal. Cumulative layers of meaning are ripe for structuralist analysis, as well as literary, art historical, anthropological, and even psychological, philosophical, and cognitive science analytical approaches. I simply prefer that scholars be clear on historical timelines for the history of interpretation, which is our data. There are epistemological differences in interpreting ancient documents, including the Bible, as literature, myth, historiography, theology, philosophy, and so on (Von Hendy 2002, p. 16). My engagement with Von Hendy and scholarship on the history of Religious Studies and theorization of religion, myth, and ritual assists us in contextualizing engagement with myth theory among biblical scholars. There are hierarchies within our primary data and also hierarchies that we generate with our scholarly labels, categories, and distinctions (J. Z. Smith 2009; Sharpe 2014).

Within the field of Biblical Studies, scholars interested in myth theory have developed substantial nuance on the issue of framing *myth* and Bible as opposing or related categories. Some of the relatively progressive publications from the 1970s remain insightful on myth and the Bible, especially John W. Rogerson's *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (Rogerson 1974). Looking back, the works of Rogerson (1974), Robert A. Oden (1987), Brevard S. Childs (1962), J. J. M. Roberts (1986), Simon B. Parker (1997), and Nick Wyatt (2008) stand out, as these scholars posed questions and articulated positions regarding the category of myth within Biblical Studies that forged the paths for scholars working within this area within the past 10 to 15 years. At the same time, in conference settings and scholarly

conversation, the topic of myth garners a variety of attitudes, including giving a polite nod to myth theory, with the justification that biblical scholarship has already dealt with the "problem of myth" as a category, such that it no longer requires conversation. While we have excellent models for how to utilize the category productively, I caution that we ought not take for granted a general agreement on how to do so. Moreover, we can continue to gain insights about the ancient data through continued reflection on how we construct the categories we impose upon our data. Above, I indulge in reviewing the outdated dichotomies, not to dwell on them, since they are now familiar background for many biblical scholars, Classicists, and scholars of Ancient Studies more broadly, but rather to provide contrast that highlights how far we have come.

3. Theorizing Myth to Facilitate Comparison and Re-Description within Biblical Studies

Scholars now identify mythic themes and motifs throughout the biblical anthology. While this discussion focuses on the Hebrew Bible, the same applies to the Judean texts that eventually comprise the Christian New Testament. Mythic motifs, themes, and imagery occur throughout every genre distinction that one might make throughout the biblical anthology: primeval narrative; ancestral or foundational narrative; historiography and court narrative; prophecy; poetry and psalm; proverbs or wisdom; and apocalyptic writings. Literary attestations often garner more attention than visual and material media. However, mythic motifs appear in diverse visual and material media, such as figurines, mosaics, glyptics, paintings, utensil and container decorations, and literary descriptions of decor.

My own scholarly interest in reflection on the category of myth was inspired by reading Robert A. Oden's 1987 work, *The Bible Without Theology*, as a graduate student, specifically his description of the categories 'myth' and 'monotheism', as they have been utilized in operative opposition. As summarized in the final section on rectification of categories, there are many categories, often intertwining with myth, that we continually scrutinize. In my study of mythic motifs and the topos of the so-called Combat Myth, Conflict Myth, or *Chaoskampf*, I was fascinated by how scholarly study of ancient data was continually impacted by miscategorization, mislabeling, and misunderstanding within past scholarly discussion. I devote a chapter, entitled, "Theorizing Myth in Ancient West Asian Studies", to such categorical issues of conceptualizing 'monotheism' and 'myth' within comparative study of biblical traditions (Ballentine 2015, pp. 1–21). In the book as a whole, I aim to highlight ideological functions of one particular topos, and this focus also destabilizes theological and teleological interpretations of Hebrew Bible traditions. My general approach to 'myth' is that it involves narrative presentation of a perceptual social and 'natural' world order, exhibiting inherently hierarchical taxonomies with which humans communicate contingent ideologies as if they are universal or 'given'; myth, as such, can be operative within a variety of literary, spatial, and social contexts. While we distinguish between various narrative and visual forms, functions, and content, the bulk of our data exhibits blendings of our parsed categories (Ballentine 2015, p. 13, with further references n. 53; Callender 2014).

Returning to Oden's influence in calling for reflection and scrutiny of how we use categories, I would summarily rephrase his valuable assessment as a critical scholarly question of *the Bible with whose(?) theology*. Oden's explanations of how theologies operate as hermeneutics, with implicit and explicit assumptions and in ways that influence history of interpretation and bolster theological agendas, remains compelling, especially for interest in the intersection of 'monotheism' and 'myth' (Oden 1987, p. 36). Referencing the ripple effects of framing 'monotheism' and 'myth' as mutually exclusive, he states "needless to say, this formula leads necessarily to the affirmation that biblical thought is unique, an affirmation of great service to theology" (Oden 1987, p. 48). In some ways, the field of Biblical Studies is still catching up with Oden's suggestions for moving forward (see also Berlinerblau 2005). Oden identified the ways in which comparative study in biblical scholarship differs from that regarding other traditions, specifically portrayals of 'religion'

designated as 'biblical' or 'Israelite' as absolutely, radically, and superiorly separate from that within the surrounding environment (Oden 1987, pp. 155, 157).

The following works on 'myth' take into account hindering categorical issues, especially the notion that theories of myth and methodologies for studying mythic motifs would be irrelevant within biblical scholarship. Such a notion operates with the outdated 'myth versus Bible' framework, charted above (Table 1). These works also exhibit the great deal that biblical scholars contribute across the Humanities to myth studies, literary studies, and sociology of the ancient. John Rogerson's many influential works are essential reading on this topic, including, recently, "'Myth' in the Old Testament" (Rogerson 2014). Dexter E. Callender, Jr., a leading voice in this area, identifies four central issues for biblical scholars to continue to address: "myth and history"; "myth and ritual"; "myth's relation to experience"; and "its place with respect to ideology" (Callender 2013). We can see the rich benefits of promoting comparative studies unhindered by categorical exclusions and hierarchies pertaining to 'myth' in the recent cross-disciplinary studies and anthologies of ancient texts such as Carolina López-Ruiz's *Gods, Heroes, and Monsters* (López-Ruiz 2014), Daniel Ogden's *Dragons, Serpents, and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds* (Ogden 2013), and Sarah Iles Johnston's *The Story of Myth* (Johnston 2018). López-Ruiz has distinguished herself as an exemplary expert in comparing ancient Near Eastern and Greek materials (López-Ruiz 2019). Her work illustrates ways that we can overcome the often arbitrary, or problematically interested, ways that scholars have divided Classics and ancient Near Eastern materials. In *Colonial Encounters in Ancient Iberia*, López-Ruiz articulates the important methodological observation that influence is not a one-way street, and she demonstrates what rich insights we can draw out of the data when we take this observation seriously (López-Ruiz and Dietler 2009). *Colonial Encounters* focuses on Greek and Phoenician interaction with the Iberian Peninsula in the first millennium BCE. Her 2014 anthology demonstrates this observation for Greek and Phoenician interaction to the east. In both, López-Ruiz models how we can utilize our training in philology and history to push forward comparative methodologies, with attention to, for example, the comparison of archeological data with literary data for real and imagined geographical and cosmological landscapes and mythscapes. Comparative studies of myth show that a general loosening of outmoded categorical distinctions improves our reconstruction of ancient theological paradigms, models, or notions more broadly.

In his introductory textbook *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Coogan 2011), Michael Coogan utilizes the term 'myth' for the two creation accounts in Genesis (Coogan 2011, p. 31), in the callout box on "Myth and the Bible" (Coogan 2011, p. 38 Box 3.3), and when discussing features and 'fantasy' characteristics of biblical apocalyptic literature (Coogan 2011, p. 432). Coogan's comfort with the terms myth and mythology show remarkable contrast with older textbooks that utilize the designation 'myth' to communicate contrasts between 'Canaanite myth' and biblical 'faith' (Ballentine 2015, pp. 17–18, 205 nn.78, 79, 80). A continued importance of returning to Cross's insights regarding Israelite traditions within the Canaanite milieu is partially due to some scholars minimizing the continuities that he elucidated (Cross 1973). If 'Canaanite myth' and 'Hebrew epic' are (misguidedly) regarded as utterly separated categories, then any biblical motifs, themes, and imagery that are similar to 'myth' are regarded as a distorted 'Canaanizing'. Through such a lens, there could be no 'genuine' Israelite or Judean mythic imagery (Ballentine 2015, pp. 11, 17, 133). The tendency to pose sharp distinctions between 'myth', 'epic', and 'historiography', which each feature divine beings, reproduces a theological schema based on *who* is imagined to have produced a 'myth' or 'historiography'. This impacts study of how mythic motifs are generated and adapted throughout Israelite and Judean data.

In addition to shifting away from myth as a genre designation to identifying mythic themes, imagery, and motifs throughout the biblical anthology (Ballentine 2015, pp. 14–15), there has also been a shift to focus on the humans doing the myth-making (Ballentine 2015, p. 3). As McCutcheon states, "A rectified study of myths thus turns out to be study of

mythmaking" (McCutcheon 2009, p. 207). McCutcheon credits J. Z. Smith for his insight that "a myth has its authority not by proving itself but by presenting itself" (J. Z. Smith 1974, p. 715). Burton Mack, also engaging with J. Z. Smith, has helpfully developed the framework that "Mythmaking and social formation go together". He explains that humans engage in processes of social group formation and reformation as they rearrange, make, and remake myths through "experimentation and bricolage" (Mack 1996, p. 256; 2009, pp. 289–92). In line with this focus on the humans utilizing, generating, and interpreting myths, Kevin McGinnis has discussed how myth functions through reception and redeployment. In his paper entitled, "The Bible is the Problem: Why Ideological Myth Criticism Requires That We Expand Our Corpus", he examined the roles of ideological myth criticism within Biblical Studies (McGinnis 2019). He emphasized that the reception and redeployment that is key for our studies happens among communities of people. One interesting aspect of emphasizing the people-generated quality of myth-making is that it becomes irrelevant whether or not a source itself is considered myth, as any source might be utilized in myth-making. We can explore this dialogic of hypothetical communities and their mythmaking, as it survives in texts and art, while knowing that oral traditions and various literature and art does not survive to us. McGinnis also reminds us to question how knowledge of myth might have differed between elites and non-elites, cautioning us to carefully consider how we make statements about awareness and knowledge of myth. More broadly, Johnston navigates how slippery the concept of 'belief' is in relation to myths (Johnston 2018, p. 18), and Callender poses the question: *Did the Israelites Believe Their Myths?* (Callender Forthcoming).

More so than related disciplines, Biblical Studies includes scholarship, departments, programs, and publications that are explicitly and purposefully confessional, and this impacts the rate at which critical scholarly discussion improves upon our theoretical models and explanations of the ancient data. That is, if an interpreter of the biblical text has an invested interest in bolstering interpretations of biblical texts that support modern theologies, this impacts scholarly discussions at our professional conferences, within our classrooms, and around publications on the relevant topics (for references, see Ballentine 2015, p. 205 n.70; Young 2020; Berlinerblau 2005). It is not my scholarly purview to impact any reader's personal belief system vis-à-vis their preferred theology. Rather, my aim is to identify how the topic of myth has been especially impacted by the history of the scholarly discipline of Biblical Studies. Considering this history, I am interested in amplifying the work of scholars currently engaged with theorizing myth, critical comparative studies, redescription of our data, and rectification of the category myth.

4. Rectification of Related Categories within Biblical Studies, Going Forward

In our research and teaching, many of us have utilized the model for *how to do comparison* developed by J. Z. Smith (2000; see critique in Satlow 2005). Description includes robust, thick description of each exemplar, including both a deep dive into the ancient contexts and attention to the reception-history and scholarly tradition. Then, comparison includes similarities and differences. Re-description comprises describing each anew, and importantly, "each in light of the other", such that it is not a one-way view. Finally, we engage in a rectification of our categories (J. Z. Smith 2000; Mack 1996, 2003). Each scholar can reflect upon where we see our studies and insights contributing to our ability to do one or more of these steps. Collectively, scholars who engage in theorizing myth have all built on the productive rectification of the category that prior scholars accomplished. I envision ongoing study of myth as a spiral through time, continuing this four-stage process.

The works of scholars who have focused on the category of myth additionally contribute towards the rectification of categories other than myth. This includes a broad range of categories, as exhibited by the following literary, sociological, cultic, and hermeneutical examples. Most immediately obvious are relationships with the category myth among the genre designations ritual, epic, and legend (M. S. Smith 2006; Wyatt 2008; Ballentine 2015, p. 11–12 with further references p. 203 nn. 47, 49). Callender explores with nuance

relationships between the categories 'myth' and 'scripture' (Callender 2014). Likewise, categorical designations impacted by the implications of the reverential designation 'scripture' include: 'rewritten bible', 'rewritten scripture', parascriptural, parabiblical, canonical, non-canonical, and any similar terms or categories that potentially impose categories through implicit or explicit contrast. Discussions around the historical contexts and motivations into categorizations of myth, Bible, and 'scripture' complement important work in the field more broadly aiming to expose the continued impacts of colonial contexts within Biblical Studies, as well-represented by Vincent Wimbush (2017). Wimbush, in his book *Scripturaletics: The Management of Meaning*, coins the term *scripturaletics* in his dismantling of what he argues are problematic assumptions about scripture, for example the fetishizing of not just so-called scripture but also exegetical methods within confessional settings as well as our academic scholarly modes of interpretation.

Oden and Rogerson's pointed critiques anticipate recent interrogations of how categorical hierarchies around 'myth' as a genre designation impacts literary and ideological interpretations within later contexts, including Andrew Tobolowsky's discussion of Romantic nationalism shaping study of 'myth' and the Hebrew Bible (Tobolowsky 2020) and Robyn Walsh's discussion of neo-Romantic concepts determining reconstructions of New Testament 'community' and 'oral tradition' development (Walsh 2019, 2021). Walsh encourages us to inquire how we attempt to explain 'origins' of groups and texts, as well as the scholarly history of attempts to explain 'origins'. Walsh discusses how the intellectual ethos of scholars within their institutional and political contexts, especially within Romantic-era Germany, shaped the scholarly discipline of Biblical Studies. This history of the field includes points of normativity and exclusion, the bifurcation of Classics and Religious studies, nationalistic uses of various characterizations of Christians and related literature, racist and anti-Semitic notions among quasi-linguistic and skewed cultural studies, and imperial interpretations (Walsh 2019, 2021).

The dismantling, by which I mean review and revision, of categorical labels and their implicit hierarchies is helpful for disrupting foundational assumptions in our scholarly disciplines. A major set of sociological and cultic identifying labels are: Judean, Israelite, Canaanite, 'foreign', Jewish, Christian, and 'pagan' (Ballentine 2019; Rainey 2018). How we parse groupings, social identifications, individual self-understandings, and so forth impacts our conceptualization of what comprises the ancient Mediterranean milieu, geographically, linguistically, and socially. Several cultic or theological loci include the category of 'monotheism', hierarchies of divine beings, cross-cultural dynamics of interpretatio (Eyl 2021; Ando 2005; Ballentine 2021; Stowers 2021; Sonia 2021), and even portrayals of goddesses and biblical women figures and abstractions (Stavrakopoulou 2017; Hackett 1989; D'Allesandro 2020).

One cannot overstate the impacts of Enlightenment and Newtonian scientific discourses on ideas about divine beings, 'natural religion', and a disenchanted material world (Stowers 2012, 2021; Von Hendy 2002, p. 20; Ballentine 2021). As Hendy argues, in turn, scholarly intellectualist explanations of etiological stories were a reaction to the development of a 'scientific' worldview (Von Hendy 2002, p. 333). More recent intersections between the study of religion and scientific perspectives focus around utilizing cognitive theories (Callender 2019; Singletary 2021; Robertson 2019; Laine 2018; Hogue 2021). Stowers caveats that when scholars of religion utilize cognitive theories, it is best to still ground our explanations within social theories (Stowers 2020).

Rigorous discussion is requisite within Biblical Studies, Religious Studies, and Ancient Studies, especially as the categorical frameworks we utilize have impacted and are intertwined with the comparative methodologies that we use across the Humanities to discuss ancient literature, society, and cultus. Among biblical scholars, we continually scrutinize and revise our comparative methods for reconstructing ancient realia. In doing so, conversations about methodology benefit each of our subfields, progressing the discourse within Biblical Studies and strengthening the inherently interdisciplinary work of the broader fields of Ancient Studies and Religious Studies. I appreciate this opportunity to contribute

to the ongoing scholarly discussion of the category myth and notions of mythic motifs, themes, imagery, and topoi within the Hebrew Bible, by sharing my own views and by promoting the work of scholars whose discussions of myth show us paths forward both within Biblical Studies and throughout the Humanities.

Notes

1   For discussion of Otto's phenomenological model and the influence thereof, see Fitzgerald (2009); Arnal (2009); and McCalla (2009); for Otto's "The Analysis of 'Mysterium'", see Harding and Rodrigues (2014, pp. 141–45).

2   Compare with Cyrus Gordon's *Homer and Bible, the Origin and Character of East Mediterranean Literature* (Gordon 1967).

3   For example, at Rutgers, I worked with colleagues within the Classics department to organize an interdisciplinary working group of faculty and graduate students from a variety of departments to explore questions around how we study the 'ancient': What are the definitions of 'ancient' that we employ? How widely, in terms of geography and time, can those definitions be employed? What are the impacts of them on global periodicities as well as disciplinary periodicities? Why are definitions, notions, and the implications of 'ancient' worth exploring? Why have we valued the ancient? How does 'ancient' get implicated in teleology? What are the politics of the 'ancient'? Such opportunities to discuss the impacts of our studies across disciplinary boundaries are highly valuable. Similarly, during my time as a Ph.D. student at Brown University, the CRAM seminar (Cultures and Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean) was a central and highly productive aspect of our interdisciplinary training.

4   I wish to thank the chairs and committee members of the SBL unit "The Bible, Myth, and Myth Theory", both those whom I have had the privilege of working with and those who worked on the unit before I joined, especially Dexter E. Callender, Jr., who founded the unit. A major impetus for this special issue was our 2019 panel on "Myth Theory in the Study of Religion", presided by David Litwa. Many of my thoughts within this article were formulated for my response paper within that panel, which featured productive presentations and discussion among the panelists Kevin McGinnis, Dexter E. Callender, Jr., Robyn Walsh, and Carolina López-Ruiz.

5   When discussing this with students, I use the shorthand phrase 'capital T truth' to reference the discursive dynamic of truth-claims being presented as if they are objective circumstances. Some readers might never have seen publications in which the word truth is actually capitalized, along with additional capitonyms such as Good, Beauty, the One, Grace, Providence, Justice, Divine, and so forth. For discussion of the phenomenon of stative capitalization, its history and problems with the convention, see Alan Levinowitz (2015, p. 783). He traces the use of capitalization to signify something qualitative, "nebulous theological or metaphysical significance", rather than something grammatical, including in early print editions of the Bible (Levinowitz 2015, p. 786).

6   As Ballentine directly states, "To be clear, I would not suggest that there is nothing peculiar or innovative in the Hebrew Bible or among Israelite and Judean traditions–quite the opposite is true . . . However, we must not suggest that the authors of biblical texts were innovative in ways that were distinct from the capacities or general perceptual world order of any other ancient authors" (Ballentine 2015, p. 20).

7   τουτο δε καῖ οἵ ιεροι καθ᾽ ημας δίδάσκουσί λόγοί πασι μεν τοις εθνεσι το καταρχας την των ορωμένων φωστήρων τιμήν ἀπονενεμησθαι περιεχοντες, μόνω δε τω Εβραίων γένει την εποπτείαν ανατεθεῖσθαι [της θεωρίας] του των όλων ποιητον τε καῖ δημιουργού Θεού, και της εις αυτον άληθους ευσέβειας.

8   Lincoln's articulation is worth reproducing in full: "Unlike other groups, however, those with a religious cohesiveness are concerned to reconcile the gritty nature of their struggles with the precepts featured in their discourse, a task that may be sufficiently difficult as to prompt a highly selective reading of texts and tradition, along with the most ingeniously strained hermeneutics. When relevant actors fulfill this task to their own satisfaction, they are able to define themselves and their cause as both moral and holy. Beyond that, they can define the goods they desire in similar terms: sacred land, sacred offices, sacred symbols. Similarly, they can construe their enemies as desolate populations (e.g., 'infidels', 'pagans', 'heretics',) waiting to be brought into their sacred community. Such understandings condition the morale, intensity, and commitment of those who accept them, and they have the potential to transform even the most sordid squabbles into *jihads* and crusades from which retreat, surrender, and compromise are equally inconceivable" (Lincoln 1998, p. 66).

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